MARCH 1994

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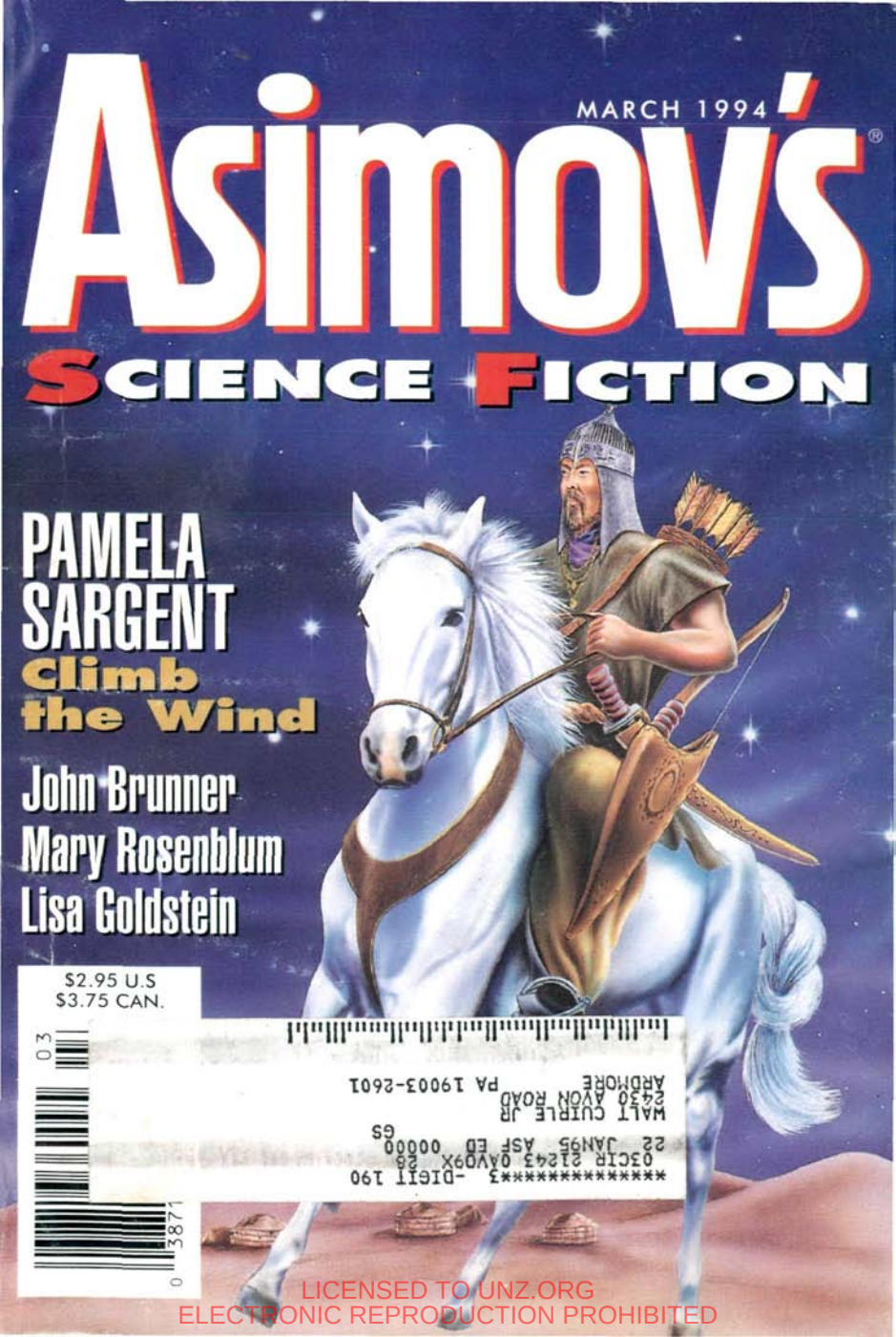

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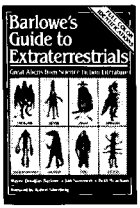

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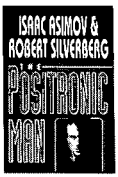

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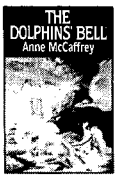

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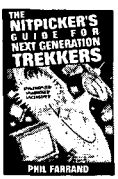

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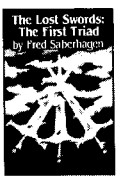

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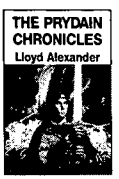

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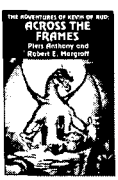

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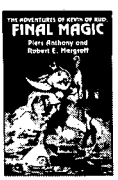

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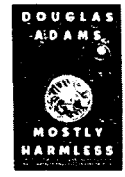

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-two Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have recieved nine Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 1993 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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LETTERS

Dear Gardner, Sheila, and Co.,

Chad Oliver, anthropologist, writer, and one of the world's truly gracious human beings, died last night, after a protracted illness. Early on in the 1970s, when we young snotnoses began making all the commotion we could, he found himself cast in the unasked-for role of Dean of Texas Science Fiction Writers; he became, in the ensuing years, simply a dear friend. He and Howard Waldrop were devoted fishing buddies. He and I loved old big-band music and went so far as to revive an old apples-and-oranges argument from another era, who's the better clarinetist, Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw? Mostly, though, we just listened and were happy. He was warm, funny, and told wonderful stories, in person and on paper. *Shores of Another Sea*, "King of the Hill," and the two westerns, *The Wolf is My Brother* and *Broken Eagle* are works any writer could be proud of.

Best Regards,

Steven Utley
Austin, TX

Dear *Asimov's*,

Back in May, 1993, I read the Mary Rosenblum novella "Stairway," and was very impressed. I went back through recent issues and found her two novelettes, "The Rain Stone" and "Entrada." And I was fast on my way to the bookstore to pick up *The Drylands*, which convinced me that I had fallen for Ms. Rosenblum and her captivating writing style. Del Rey printed her novel as a part of their Discovery series of books designed to introduce new and promising authors, and Mary Rosenblum is quite a discovery! But my thanks still go to everyone at *Asimov's* for introducing me to her.

Sincerely,

James Lynch
Setauket, NY

Dear Gardner:

I may be a jaded forty-six-year-old, but I haven't lost that child's sense of wonder and excitement—and I'm sure feeling it over the double-Castro issue. Kessel's story is *remarkable*, one of his very finest, and my only hope—in comparison—is that mine will strike the reader as mercifully brief... and poignant. I'm glad both stories target the *human*, actually; together they may twist the reader past the humor and irony into all sorts of rewarding questions and feelings.

I'm also flattered as hell to have such a brave, excellent job done by the "Southpaw Illustrator," Gary

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Freeman. It's the best any McAllister story has received (though "Angels" was wonderful too).

Anyway, congratulations (he said vainly) on a wonderful magazine issue and I'm dying to hear of any feedback (and old enough to enjoy its full range).

Best,

Bruce McAllister
Redlands, CA

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I had to write and tell you how much I am enjoying (haven't read all the stories yet) the August issue, in particular stories by two newcomers to *Asimov's*: Sonia Orin Lyris's "A Hand in the Mirror," and Michael H. Payne's "River Man." "River Man" was utterly charming and engrossing—a wild combination of *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Wizard of Oz* but with lots of nifty twists . . . more please! And the development of new aspects of cyberspace and the corruption thereof kept me flipping the pages fast in "A Hand in the Mirror."

I don't think many writers can top John Kessel for sheer powerhouse prose; I started reading "The Franchise" because I knew I'd like what Kessel does with words, and found myself becoming totally involved in the story . . . plus I learned a whole lot about baseball. A real winner. Bruce Sterling's "Deep Eddy" was a gorgeous romp that never really got anywhere, but I had a hell of a good time on the way.

Phillip C. Jennings's "Precarnation" disappointed me. I felt that an intriguing situation could have been better served with more at-

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tention to motivation, emotional tone, and logical follow-through.

I look forward with great anticipation to the next issue.

Sincerely,

Sally McBride
Victoria, BC
Canada

Dear Mr. Dozois,

Thank you for publishing Kathleen Ann Goonan's "Kamehameha's Bones" (Sept. 1993). It's a beautifully written story dealing with issues that are painfully alive in Hawaii today. The questions surrounding the return of sovereignty to the Hawaiian People won't be easily solved, but if anyone can ease the attempt by "chanting the universe" I suspect it may be Goonan. The idea that Princess Kaiulani might even now be wandering the islands is not at all hard to imagine. Congratulations to artist Laurie Harden, too. Her image is as honest as the story. Aloha!

Carol Severance
Hilo, HI

Dear Gardner:

I especially enjoyed the recent September issue of *Asimov's*. Goonan's "Kamehameha's Bones" was stunning, and I was very impressed with Willis's "Close Encounter," Wade's "The Cool Place," and Bisson's "The Shadow Knows." It's going to be impossible to pick favorites for next year's Readers' Award when everything stands out.

Take care,

Wendy Rathbone
Yucca Valley, CA

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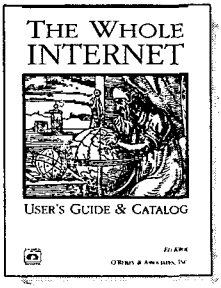
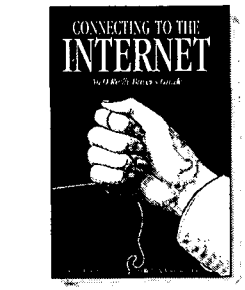
Get Connected.

You've read about cyberspace in classics from William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. That's still science-fiction, but it's not far off, once world-wide networking comes together with "virtual reality."



Here's a book on the technology as it is now– a comprehensive introduction to the international network of computer systems called the "Internet." The "Internet" is more than just a single network; it's the nexus of virtually every computer network in the world. Whether you're a researcher, a student, or just someone who likes to send electronic mail to friends, the Internet is a global resource of almost unimaginable wealth.

The Whole Internet Catalog & User's Guide covers the basic utilities that you use to access the network (telnet, ftp, mail and news readers). But it also does much more. This guide pays close attention to several important "information servers" (Archie, Wais, Gopher) that are, essentially, databases of databases: they help you find what you want among the millions of files and thousands of archives available. We've also included our own "database of databases" – a resource index that covers a broad selection of several hundred important resources found on the net, ranging from the King James Bible to the CIA World Factbook. Even if you've been around the net for a few years, you'll still be able to discover resources that you didn't know existed.



If you're not yet on the Internet, *Connecting To The Internet* provides practical advice on how to get connected. It helps you assess your needs to determine the kind of Internet service that is best for you. Then it describes how to find local access providers and evaluate the services they offer.

So if you use the Internet for work or for pleasure –or if you'd like to, but don't know how – these are the books for you.

The Whole Internet User's Guide & Catalog
By Ed Krol, 400 pages, ISBN: 1-56592-025-2, $24.95

Connecting to the Internet: An O'Reilly Buyer's Guide
By Susan Estrada, 1st Edition August 1993, 188 pages, ISBN: 1-56592-061-9, $15.95

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CLIMB THE WIND

Pamela Sargent

Over the past year Pamela Sargent's short fiction has received a number of well-deserved honors. Her novelette, "Danny Goes to Mars" (*Asimov's*, October 1992) swept the 1993 Nebula and Locus awards and was a finalist for the Hugo, while an earlier story, "Gather Blue Roses," was reprinted in the *Norton Book of Science Fiction*. In May, Ms. Sargent departs for Barcelona on a promotional tour for *Ruler the Sky*—her historical novel about Genghis Khan, art. Jonathan and Lisa Hunt

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They rode out of Orion, growing larger until they filled the sky. They had appeared as small, nebulous shapes, swelling in size until there were thousands of ghostly giants on horseback galloping soundlessly overhead, the stars of the night sky showing through the ripples of their transparent coats and the bodies of their steeds.

I was too stunned to be terrified of this unexplainable sight. Then a shout came from behind me, and the people gathered in the square were thrusting their arms upward as they cried out to one another in their harsh, alien language. As the apparitions grew larger, covering more of the sky, I could see them more clearly. By the time the horsemen filled the sky completely, the Mongolians around me were silent.

All of us saw the riders; that much was evident. As frightening as the vision was, I didn't have to fear that it was my own private madness.

After a while, I lowered my eyes and looked around at the knots of people who had rushed into the huge square. Most of them were still gazing skyward. I saw no sign of fear; a few of the Mongolians were even smiling.

"I don't believe it," Allen said at last.

I glanced at him, then looked toward the center of the square. Another horseman was there, a warrior of stone astride a horse that stood on a massive stone base. Our guide had pointed out the monument to us that morning; the stone horseman was Sukhe Bator, Mongolia's revolutionary hero, the man who had begged Lenin and the Soviet Union to come to his country's aid. The Russians had come and gone, leaving a legacy of grim, decaying apartment blocks, wide empty streets, and drab monumental buildings—some still with Cyrillic lettering—surrounded by barbed wire. Sukhe Bator was being replaced in his people's hearts by an older hero, Genghis Khan.

Again I wondered what had brought me to Ulan Bator, what I had hoped to find here. Perhaps the horsemen in the night sky were a sign.

More people were gathering in the square to look up at the unearthly horsemen. The Mongolians were strangely calm as they watched the sky, and maybe their composure kept my own fears at bay. I noticed then that the riders seemed to be clothed in long tunics and baggy trousers, with what looked like quivers and bowcases hanging from their belts. I squinted, and saw long mustaches on their faces and coiled braids behind their ears.

They looked, I thought, like Mongols—not the placid people standing near me in the square, but more like the ancestors who had conquered most of the Asian continent.

The horsemen were sweeping toward us, shrinking to normal size as they bore down on us. Someone was shouting, but the people near me

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were frozen. I wanted to run, but dimly realized that I would not penetrate that crowd, that trying to flee might start a panic. A wall of riders, now our size, fell on us in silence, their ghostly forms shimmering—and passed through us, vanishing into the ground.

We stood there for a long time, until the last of the riders had disappeared. It was past ten o'clock when people began to wander toward the streets bordering the vast square. There had been no sign of panic. Maybe these people assumed that the vision was only another product of advanced technology, a more developed country's experiment, no different in kind from the trail of a missile being tested, the pale stream of a jet's passage, or the bright pinprick of a satellite moving amid familiar constellations. I could almost believe that the vision was explainable, cut off from everything as we were; the outside world had become unknown territory.

"Good God," Allen muttered. "What the hell does it mean? You got any ideas, Bill?" He shook his head. "Some sort of light show. That's it—some kind of display for the tourists." I could tell he didn't really believe that.

At last we left the square, walking back along a street wide enough for a good-sized army to march through to the concrete box that was our hotel. Allen said nothing on the way; I caught him chewing at his lower lip when I glanced at him. The only traffic was an occasional truck, bus, or run-down jeep. Mongolians stood along the side of the street, murmuring to one another and then gesturing toward the sky.

A few Westerners were outside the hotel. "*Les cavaliers,*" a woman said in French, and then I caught the word "*ciel,*" and knew she had seen the riders, too. Maybe the whole city had seen them. The shabby dark mutton-scented hotel lobby was crowded with tourists. Some seemed frozen in place, unable to move; others were shaking their heads and gesturing wildly. A few men were heading toward the bar. I expected Allen, who had attached himself to me during the flight from San Francisco to Beijing, to ask me to join him for a drink. Instead, he walked toward the elevators, muttering something about trying to find a news broadcast on his short-wave radio.

If I waited around, someone else from the tour would probably show up to offer theories about the heavenly riders while we fortified our nerves with a few drinks. But I didn't feel like sitting in the cheerless bar rotting my stomach with undiluted vodka; I'd learned the first night here that if I didn't order it straight, I risked getting it mixed with a wretched-tasting orange soda. The vodka was named after Genghis Khan, and the bartender wore a button with a portrait of the mighty Mongol conqueror who had believed his people were destined to rule all the lands under Heaven.

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I went to my floor. The sixteen people on our tour had been scattered to different floors, but Gil Severn, the tour guide, had the room next to mine. "You won't like Ulan Bator," he had warned me over the phone a month before we left the States. "Ugliest city in the world. But it'll be worth it when we get out in the countryside. Great scenery. Great hunting—or, in your case, shooting." I had told him that I planned to do my hunting through the lens of a camera. We had been promised an excursion to Karakorum, an optional side trip on horseback to what was alleged to be a typical Mongolian settlement, a visit to a reopened Buddhist monastery, and a flight to the Altai Mountains for three days of hunting before a train trip back to Beijing and more sightseeing there.

I entered my room, closed the door behind me, and finally acknowledged how frightened I was. That the vision had been a collective hallucination was the most obvious explanation. The Mongolians, for unconscious reasons of their own, had looked up to see images seemingly drawn from their glorious past, and the foreigners visiting Ulan Bator had somehow been drawn into this mass delusion.

I had brought some paperback mysteries with me, and read for a while, but the words on the page didn't seem to connect. I had washed, changed into my pajamas, and was about to go to bed when someone knocked on the door.

Allen was in the hall, clutching a bottle. "Did I wake you?" he asked. I shook my head. "Been listening to the BBC." He held the bottle up. "Scotch."

I could smell the Scotch on his breath. "Come on in."

He sat down in the room's only chair; I settled myself on one of the narrow beds as he handed me the bottle. "Help yourself, Bill," he said. "You'll need it. Those guys on horseback—they're seeing them in other places, according to the news." He ran a hand through his thick gray hair. "Nobody knows what they are."

"You mean—" I was trying to absorb this. "The whole world's seeing Mongols riding toward us from the sky?"

"Not quite. In Europe, they say folks are seeing guys in helmets and armor. Somebody in Germany was talking about seeing dames with shields."

"Valkyries," I muttered.

"In the Middle East, they had robes and those cloth jobs Arabs wear on their heads. The BBC was getting a report from Moscow when I was listening—there it's Cossacks." Allen's broad chest heaved as he took a deep breath. "Some TV crews with camcorders tried to get tapes, but nothing came out. It's like the riders weren't really there."

"What else is going on?" I asked.

"In some places, it was about the way it was here—people standing

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around staring at the sky, watching them ride right through everybody and then just evaporating. Other places, people panicked and got into car accidents and such. Nobody said anything about riots, but I wouldn't be surprised. Some folks got down on their knees and started praying."

"The Horsemen of the Apocalypse," I said softly.

"Maybe that's what some folks thought." Allen leaned back; his ruddy face seemed paler. "And here we are stuck in a place where it's hard to find out what's really going on."

"Maybe it's just as well we're here," I said. "The Mongolians seem to be taking it in stride. We might be in more danger back home."

"Maybe, but hell—my kids are there. They must be wondering what they're going to see when it's night. Wish we weren't so damned cut off. I've got a good mind to try and get a call through to my son." He took the bottle from me.

"This might be a one-time thing," I said.

"Hope you're right."

"There'll probably be some more news by morning. Anyway, we've got that trip to Karakorum coming up tomorrow." I was trying to sound confident. "Better get some rest."

"Yeah." Allen got up. "The scientists'll figure it out. There has to be a reason." He ambled toward the door. "See you, Bill."

When he was gone, I stretched out, but couldn't sleep. For a moment, I thought of knocking on Gil's door and asking him what he thought of the phenomenon, then glanced at the pocket alarm clock on the night table. It was past three A.M.; he'd be asleep, and we were supposed to start for Karakorum in the morning.

I didn't like sharing a room while traveling; it was worth the extra expense to be able to retreat to my customary solitude when tour companions got on my nerves. Apparently Allen felt the same way, since he was the only other person on this tour traveling as a single. Now I was beginning to wish I had offered to share a room with him. It would have helped having someone to talk to, and we could have listened to more news on his radio. I could have turned on the battered TV in my room, but any news I picked up there, assuming any was on, would probably be in Mongolian.

New experiences—that's the reason I gave others for traveling. It was easier than admitting that I had little else to do and that depression set in if I stayed home too long. Saying that I had made some good investments and had taken an early retirement sounded better than telling people that a trust fund had eased my way through life. To speak of needing change and adventure in my life hid the fact that the journeys I took were usually safer than some might think; I was a tourist, not an adventurer. I would go home and regale my acquaintances—I couldn't

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call most of them friends—with stories of my latest trip until it was time to plan a new excursion.

This trip to Mongolia was different from my other travels because I wasn't just trying to avoid depression or to distract myself from a largely pointless existence by coming here; I was looking for something else. I had read about these people and their history years before, when their land was inaccessible. Maybe the country's remoteness was what had attracted me. Mongolia had become for me a dream of deserts and steppes, of nomads who wandered and could lose themselves in their largely empty land. Sometimes I imagined that I might in another life have been like one of the horsemen who had conquered the world, even while knowing that I was more like one of their aimless, worn-out descendants who had lost it.

I had indulged in some vague notion of testing myself in an environment that remained one of the harshest on earth. Yet I had come here with other tourists and a guide who would smooth my way here just as my family's attorney and trust fund did at home. Had I been looking for real challenges, I could have found them in my own country, among those with too many problems and not enough resources to solve them.

Despair was seeping into me again; my chest ached as I took a deep breath. In the morning, we would leave Ulan Bator; there would be enough activity during the trip to Karakorum to distract me and make me able to sleep soundly tomorrow night. Eventually, I would go home with stories of my Asian sojourn and the mysterious horsemen I had seen; I did not expect them to reappear. By then, the vision would be analyzed and an explanation for it found; my world would be safe once more.

Breakfast, served in the large and dreary hotel restaurant, was nearly inedible sausage, rice, and tepid, bitter-tasting tea. Allen had still not arrived when we started eating. A couple of people at our large table complained about the food; we had been in Ulan Bator for two days now, with nothing to eat except badly cooked fatty lamb, rice, and something that had looked like blackened carrots and tasted like charcoal. Gil explained that there was a food shortage in the city, that most of its citizens had even less to eat.

"Never liked fruit," Sandy Rayburn said as he sawed at his sausage; he was an attorney with a chubby boyish face who looked barely old enough to be a college freshman. "My mom could never get me to eat fruit. Now I'd give anything for an orange."

"God," Isabel Monahan murmured. She was a tall lanky middle-aged woman, accompanied by an equally tall and lanky husband called Tug who had a vaguely Southern accent. "I don't suppose it's even possible

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to get a cup of coffee. Don't they know that Americans need their morning coffee?"

"I'll see what I can do." Gil stood up, smiling lopsidedly; I had seen that smile before, in Beijing, when he had informed us, exhausted as we were, that we would have to wait three hours longer than expected for our plane to Ulan Bator. "Now we were all supposed to be packed and waiting in the lobby by nine, but there's been a change of plans. Looks like we'll have to stay here one more night—Tserendjav, our Juulchin guide, tells me he hasn't been able to get us the jeeps we need. So you're free until about one—take a stroll, or catch up on some sleep if you like. We'll go over to the National Museum this afternoon and by tonight we should know about arrangements for going to Karakorum."

"Might as well sleep," Tug Monahan said. "This town doesn't have a whole lot of attractions."

"You all know about—well, about those sky riders," Gil went on; his smile faded. "They're being seen everywhere. I think the officials here are a bit more worried than they're letting on, but I'm hoping our plans won't be disrupted." He looked down. "I've got to meet Tserendjav and straighten things out. See you a little before one, in the lobby."

Most of the others looked resigned. Tug Monahan opened his mouth, as if about to ask a question, but Gil was already retreating toward the distant doorway.

"Well," Isabel Monahan said. "We'd better make it to the Altais. They'd better not screw that up. That's the main reason we came."

I could believe it. Most of the people on this tour were hunters or at least played at being hunters, and during our flight, the Monahans had chattered about their earlier safaris. Apparently one of their main pleasures in life was blasting away at wild animals, and places like Mongolia and Siberia were likely to be the new big game hunting grounds. Africa was played out, and the Mongolians and Russians needed hard currency. Isabel was aiming to bag an oryx, while Tug was after a big-horned Marco Polo sheep.

I was suddenly disgusted with the Monahans, with all of the hunters getting ready to plunder this land.

"Don't complain, Isabel," Lynda Gerber murmured; she was a small bony woman with short gray hair, leathery skin, and deep wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. "Half the fun of traveling to a place like this is telling everybody how difficult it was when you get home. Inconvenience is part of the deal." Lynda and her companion, a stocky middle-aged woman whose name I'd forgotten, also planned to use cameras instead of guns; they had mentioned that while we were cooling our heels in Beijing.

"That business last night," a bald man named Harvey muttered. "They

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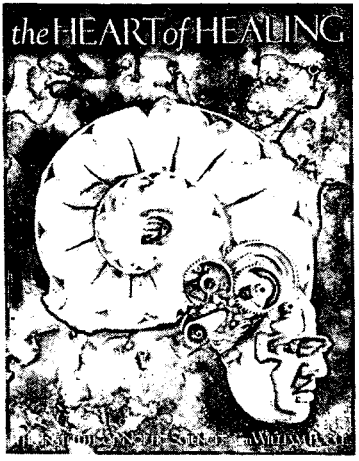

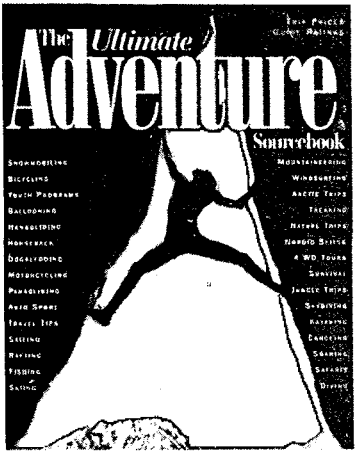

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were like ghosts. Thought I was going mental." He poked at his uneaten sausage. "If I'm going to see delusions, I'd rather see them at home."

I excused myself and left the restaurant. Gil was in the lobby, talking to Tserendjav, the guide from Juulchin, the Mongolian tourism agency. He was smiling placidly as Gil leaned closer to him. Tserendjav had a thin mustache, a wrestler's massive build, and wore a pin with a portrait of Genghis Khan on his collar. He had met us at the airport and had stood in the front of the bus grinning, saying nothing as Gil pointed out the sights, such as they were, on the way to our hotel. Gil had spoken to him only in Russian; I wondered if Tserendjav knew any English.

Allen emerged from an elevator; I hurried to him. "Hope you haven't packed yet," I told him. "Gil just told us that we're going to be staying here until tomorrow."

"I am packed. Didn't want to leave it until the last minute." He glanced in Gil's direction. "So what's the itinerary?"

"Nothing until a museum trip at one. You didn't miss much by skipping breakfast."

"Didn't think I would." He moved closer to me. "Frankly, I'm not sorry we're staying. Wouldn't surprise me if Gil's already trying to figure out how to get us home." He lowered his voice. "Got the BBC this morning. All anybody's talking about is those riders. A report was coming in from New York while I was packing."

"So they're seeing them there," I said.

"Maybe everywhere. This gal who's an astronomer was saying that people seem to be seeing them at about the same time of night. They show up, they cover the sky, they come right at you and go right through your face and disappear, until they show up again over another place where it's night. She said—" Allen frowned. "She said it's almost like a kind of signal, the way it keeps happening at regular intervals."

"That's crazy," I said.

"Then this guy came on, some scientist who writes books about weird events nobody can figure out. He was talking about how it might be a way for something to scan us, the way the riders go through everything—kind of like an MRI or an X-ray."

"It'll stop," I said. "It has to."

"I hope you're right, but the more news I heard, the more worried I got." He thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. "Might as well go back up and catch some more news."

I thought of going with him; he looked as though he might appreciate the company. But I didn't want to sit there listening to people trying to explain the unexplainable.

Allen walked toward the elevators. Gil and Tserendjav had disappeared. I went outside. The scene was much the same as it had been the

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day before. Along the wide thoroughfare, under a cloudless sky so brightly blue that the light hurt my eyes, Mongolians were strolling along the wide thoroughfare or standing in queues waiting for buses. They all had black hair and coppery skin, and most of them were dressed in a riot of color, as if their assorted blue, red, purple, green, and yellow clothing could compensate for the grayness and ugliness of Ulan Bator. A lot of them wore pins and buttons with the image of Genghis Khan. Occasionally a few people gathered in a group, then looked up at the sky.

Were they expecting to see the celestial horsemen in the daytime? I did not want to believe that they would appear again. Night would come, and my planned adventure would go on with only a day's delay.

In the National Museum, we were shepherded through a display of traditional Mongolian musical instruments, including a fiddle allegedly made from the bones of a beloved horse, then into a room devoted to Genghis Khan. Now that the Russians had gone, the Mongolians could be more open about their admiration for the one they called the Great Ancestor. Gil seemed distracted as he led us past cases containing old weapons, and past paintings of Genghis Khan holding court and leading warriors into battle. A Mongolian guide showed up only long enough to greet us before leaving the room with Gil. Shortly after that, we were ushered outside and aboard a bus.

"I've got something to say," Gil called out after we were seated. "We may—well, it may not be possible to get to Karakorum tomorrow. In fact, under the circumstances, we may be forced to leave the country."

"Forced?" someone behind me said. Allen, seated next to me, leaned forward.

"Wrong choice of words." Gil managed an uneasy grin. The bus trembled as the driver gunned the motor, then shook violently as it rolled through the parking lot. "This isn't the most efficient country under the best of circumstances," he continued, shouting above the rattling of the bus, "and things may get harder in the next few days, depending on—"

"Those sky cowboys?" Tug Monahan shouted. "Is that still going on?"

Gil glanced at him. "They were sighted over Hawaii. That's what the curator told me before we left. In Australia, people are waiting, wondering if they're going to see what everyone else already has. They don't see them riding out from Orion in the Southern Hemisphere, needless to say, since the constellations are different, and near the Arctic Circle, where the nights are so much shorter, they—"

"To hell with that," Tug Monahan said loudly. "Just tell me how much we'll get refunded on this trip if we're not going to get what we paid for."

Something flickered behind Gil's eyes. I almost expected him to go for

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Monahan, maybe throw him off the bus. The driver ignored us; I guessed that he didn't know English.

"You may recall," Gil said slowly, "that I advised you to take out travel insurance. Worry about refunds when you're back home and can talk to your lawyer. At the moment, our only realistic options may be staying in Ulan Bator for the foreseeable future or taking the first way out we can find."

"How long would we be staying?" Lynda Gerber's traveling companion asked. "I mean, if we have to stay."

"That remains to be seen." Gil clutched at the top of a seat to steady himself as the bus rounded a corner. "I'm hoping we don't have to, that I can get us out in the next day or two."

Gil sat down and didn't get up again until we were at the hotel. "Listen," he said as we were about to leave the bus, "maybe nothing will happen tonight. If it doesn't, we may be able to salvage at least some of this tour, if things get back to normal. This is important—I want all of you to come to my room tonight at eleven." He rattled off the room number a couple of times, then was silent for a few moments. "Pack your stuff if you haven't already, and keep it packed. By tonight, I may be able to tell you something."

We filed off the bus. Once we were inside, most of the others headed straight to the bar; Gil headed toward the desk clerk. The lobby was even more crowded than it had been the day before. People from other tours would be arriving only to find that the rooms reserved for them were still inhabited by earlier guests. I wondered if the government would bar any more foreigners from entering the country.

Allen gazed at me somberly. "Might as well listen to some more news."

We went up to his room, tried his TV in the hope of at least seeing some news footage, and discovered the set didn't work. The BBC signal on his radio was so faint that we had to strain to hear it. Reports about sightings in the States had come in; people in the West had seen celestial Indians in feathered headdresses. There were stories that Native Americans in various parts of the country were traveling to isolated areas, perhaps to await more visions. Urban Australia was in an uproar; no reports had come in from remote regions. The BBC news reader reported all of this in a steady, almost bored-sounding voice.

"Christ," Allen muttered. "I picked a great time to come to the back of beyond." He turned off the radio and stood up. "No point sitting around here. Might as well go downstairs and see if we can scare up a meal, then take a walk. Should be about time by then."

He was expecting to see the riders again. I realized that I was as well.

We went to the hotel's hard-currency restaurant. The meal of cold

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lamb and rice that finally reached our table was even worse than the lamb and rice we'd eaten there before, and the portions were noticeably smaller. The place was already crowded, with two groups of Japanese near us and people of various nationalities scattered around the room.

Allen nibbled at his food, then pushed the plate away. "Think I'm off my feed," he said.

"So am I."

"Let's go to the bar, then."

Every table in the small dark room was taken, but there was room at the bar to stand. Two bartenders were at work, both wearing the ubiquitous Genghis Khan buttons. "Vodka," Allen called out, raising two fingers.

The younger bartender, whose unusually long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, sidled over to us. "American?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"That is good," he said cheerfully. "I practice my English on you." I was surprised he spoke it. "Two vodka straight up?" I nodded. He set glasses in front of us and poured the drinks.

"Thanks," Allen muttered.

"You are welcome," the bartender said. "My work here is past soon. I leave in hour. You need a guide? I take you around. Twenty dollars—good price."

"What's your name?" Allen asked.

"Bayan. Means rich." The young man grinned. "You are rich. I am not."

"I worked hard for my dough." Allen pushed his glass forward; the bartender poured him another drink. "You can call me prosperous, maybe, but I'm not rich. Times are tougher. America isn't what it used to be."

"Americans richer than us." Bayan glanced at me. "Drink up, then I show you around. Twenty dollars."

I said, "There isn't much to see."

"The horsemen will come." Bayan poured drinks for two Germans near me, took their money, then leaned against the bar. "We can watch for them together."

Something about that idea appealed to me. I was also thinking that it might be useful to have a Mongolian acquaintance who spoke English if we did end up having to wait in Ulan Bator.

"All right," I said. "We'll go with you when you get off work."

Bayan nodded once, then moved away to take care of more customers. "Sure this is smart?" Allen asked. "We don't know what he might be up to."

"He wants to make some money, that's all. He might try to con us, but

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somehow I don't think he'd have a job here if he was really disreputable or dangerous." The few Mongolians I had seen at close range so far all seemed gentle, placid almost to a fault. Buddhism had changed them, and maybe the Russians had, too, after occupying their country for so long. They seemed like children in some ways; even their Genghis Khan buttons could not make them seem truly threatening. "Let's take a chance, Allen. Might as well see something of the place in case we do have to leave suddenly."

"Yeah." He downed his second drink. "I hope to hell we don't see those riders again."

I expected Bayan to walk with us to the square. Instead, he led us aboard a dilapidated bus, telling us that there would be a better view from the outer areas of the city. The bus rattled and bounced past grimy apartment blocks, then along streets lined with rows of yurts, the round tents the Mongolians called *gers*. We had seen yurt suburbs on the way in from the airport; Gil had explained that there was a housing shortage, that many in Mongolia's only real city still lived in the felt tents. We had not seen many people outside before, but tonight they were out in large numbers, walking along the streets and gathering outside their homes.

We got off the bus in a neighborhood at the edge of the city. A large group was waiting in the middle of the road; a few people carried field glasses or what looked like makeshift telescopes.

"Better view here," Bayan said. I handed him a ten-dollar bill, having promised him the rest later. We followed him along the road. People moved aside to let us pass; we made our way to the top of a small hill. From here, we could see an expanse of empty, rolling land and a black ridge in the distance. The sky was clear, but the air was chilly and the wind was picking up. I shivered, wishing I had worn warmer clothing.

"You live near here?" Allen asked. Bayan had not told us much about himself on the way over, having been more interested in practicing his dated American slang and asking us questions we couldn't answer about various rock groups and their upcoming releases.

"Wait," Bayan said, and as if on cue, the people around us subsided into silence. Bayan drew himself up, looking toward the night sky, and I thought I saw a desperate longing in his face.

It won't happen again, I told myself; it can't. Then a light blossomed near Orion, expanding rapidly until the horsemen became visible. They grew until they covered the sky; from here, they seemed larger, their forms more distinct. They rode toward us, the stars twinkling through their transparent forms. Again they were growing smaller as they swept closer, shrinking to our scale while remaining ghostly and insubstantial.

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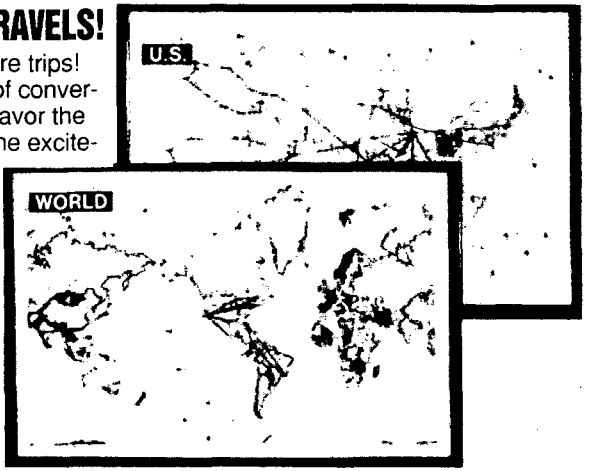

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A few people in the crowd lifted their arms, as if to embrace the riders. I kept my head raised, my neck aching, refusing to look away as they passed through us, illuminating the air around us with their soft glow as the ground swallowed them. I thought of how certain particles could pass through a man, unseen and unfelt, changing cells in ways that would become evident only years later.

The air was still; even the wind had died down. Suddenly the crowd of people began to cheer. "Hooray! Hooray!" I had not expected to hear that word coming from hundreds of Mongolian throats, or to see such joy on their faces. Bayan was cheering with the rest, rocking back and forth from the waist. "Hooray! Hooray!" Gradually the cheering stopped, and an old man just below us began to speak in a high-pitched, quavering voice. People crowded closer to him, obviously trying to hear his words.

The old man spoke only briefly, but when he had finished, two younger men came to his side and led him away. Others followed them, whispering among themselves.

Allen gazed at me, obviously dismayed. "What did that old man say?" I asked Bayan.

"That Genghis will come," he replied, "and lead us as he did before, that these horsemen are a sign. I do not believe that, of course." I was sure that he did believe it. "We are poor, we have much trouble. The Russians give us nothing now, and the rest of the world has forgotten us. That is what that old man said. But the horsemen are a sign that things now change. He said that, too. He will come—our Khan will come."

Bayan told us that for an extra ten dollars, another young man would drive us back to our hotel. He did, in a pick-up truck with no rear-view mirror and tires that were nearly bald. He seemed as naïvely hopeful as every other Mongolian we had seen that night. Maybe he was also expecting Genghis Khan to rise from the dead; maybe he simply welcomed a little excitement in what was probably a dull life.

The lobby was crowded for the late hour; a few people were stretched out on the floor, their heads against duffels. Everyone else from our tour was already in Gil's room when we arrived. Some were sitting on the beds; a couple of the men leaned against the ledge under the window. Gil was pacing. Lynda Gerber, the only smoker in the group, was puffing away on a cigarette; no one was demanding that she put it out.

Gil stopped pacing. "I just finished telling them," he said to me. "I found a flight with some empty seats. Amazing what some hard currency can do. Twelve seats on a morning flight to Beijing, three hundred dollars each. That's in addition to the bribe I paid."

"That'll take all the cash I have," Lynda murmured.

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"That can't be helped," Gil replied. "You can use your plastic in Beijing. Our embassy should have some people in the airport to help you out, but the longer you stay there, the worse it's likely to get. Try for something cheap if it's available, but buy a seat on any flight that'll get you closer to home, even if you have to go first class and it finally takes you two or three flights to get where you're going. That's the best advice I can give you."

"Better than staying here?" Lynda asked.

"We can't stay here, at least not for too much longer. A group of paleontologists came in from the Gobi today, and they're sleeping in the lobby. They're not letting any more foreigners in now, but there are still a number of people waiting to leave. They're going to need our rooms soon."

"Twelve seats," I said. "That means a few of us will have to stay." Tug Monahan's lip curled as he glanced at me, and I was sorry I had spoken.

"I'll be staying," Gil said. "I brought you here, and I'll see that the four of you stuck with me get out later."

"I'll volunteer to stay behind, then," I said, staring steadily at Tug.

"I can't afford to leave," Lynda said. "Dory can't, either." She glanced at her companion. "We saved quite a while for this trip, and I still had to borrow the money for the last deposit."

"All the ladies are going to go," Gil said. "Call that sexist if you want, but you're leaving—that's not open to discussion. Married men leave with their wives." He gazed at the Monahans; Tug said nothing. "Men with wives and little kids at home leave." He glanced at the two contractors from Oregon, who had shown us all photos of their kids during the flight from San Francisco. "That pretty much narrows it down."

Poor Allen would be stuck, I realized; he was a widower with grown children. Harvey, the bald man, was divorced, and Sandy Rayburn and I were single. They weren't likely to object, however worried they were; their pride would prevent it.

I was not frightened, and a little astonished to realize that I wasn't. Apprehension was there, and nervousness, and a hollow feeling in my belly; I could feel the tension in my neck and shoulders. But I wasn't afraid. Something of the anticipation of the Mongolians, the hope I had sensed in them as they gazed upward at the horsemen in the sky, had communicated itself to me. I wanted to stay.

"Then it's settled," Sandy said, sounding resigned.

"Those of you who are leaving," Gil said softly, "will meet me in the lobby at seven o'clock. I'll come with you to the airport and see that you get on your flight. Those staying behind—I should be back before noon, so wait for me in the bar."

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People got up and slowly left the room; there wasn't much more to say. Lynda and Dory were still sitting on one of the beds, staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry," Gil said.

"Isn't your fault." Lynda smiled lopsidedly; the lines around her eyes deepened. "Look, I'm scared enough to be glad you're making us go, even if that is sexist." She lit another cigarette. "But we aren't as well-fixed as the others in your group. I don't think our insurance is going to cover a lot of this. Paying off what we'll have to spend to get home is going to push us to the wall." She and Dory got to their feet. "See you tomorrow, Gil. At least we can say that we got to Mongolia."

I was about to follow them, then hesitated. Gil and I were alone. I rummaged in my inside jacket pocket and pulled out my checkbook, then sat down in Gil's lone chair.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I forgot Dory's last name."

"Feldon."

I wrote two checks, then handed them to him. "Six thousand for Lynda, and six for her friend. That should be more than enough to get them home. I'm good for it."

"I suspect you are."

"Just hand the checks over at the airport when they can't object. If they insist on tearing them up—"

Gil's eyes narrowed. "What's going on, Bill? Why are you doing this for people you barely know?"

"Because I can. Because they need it, and I have more than enough. Maybe because they weren't planning to kill any animals on our trip to the Altai Mountains." I left before he could say anything else.

I dreamed of the riders. It was daylight, but I could see them in the clear blue sky above Ulan Bator's main square. The stone horse carrying Sukhe Bator reared, and I watched as the steed leaped from its base and bore its rider toward the others. I climbed the base and stood where Sukhe Bator's horse had been, knowing that I too would be carried into the sky, and desperately wanting to ride there. Sukhe Bator and his horse disappeared among the throng of riders overhead, and I waited for them to sweep toward me, but they were retreating, shrinking as they rushed toward the sun.

I woke and glanced at my clock; it was past nine. After shaving and washing up, I got out my small carry-on bag; Gil might come back and tell us we had to leave immediately. I packed my toilet articles, changes of underwear, a clean shirt and pants, then added some dried fruit, my camera, my Walkman and my few cassettes. My money, credit cards, and passport were in my money belt; the rest I could leave behind if

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necessary. I moved around my room, feeling as though I had not quite shaken off my dream.

I went to the window. From there, I could see only part of one street, but the traffic seemed heavier today, with more jeeps and tanks moving past the houses. The men in the jeeps were in khaki.

I grabbed my coat and left the room. A few people were waiting by the elevators. We rode to the lobby in silence. A roar flowed toward us as the elevator doors slid open; the lobby was packed with people perched on suitcases or huddled together in groups. I pushed my way past them to the bar.

Surprisingly, the bar was largely empty. The three men who were to wait with me for Gil were already there, sitting in one dark corner. Bayan was behind the bar wiping a glass; I was reassured to see him.

"No alcohol," he said as I approached. "Can't give you alcoholic beverage."

That explained why the place was so empty. "Why not?"

Bayan gestured at the lobby beyond. "Because they said." I saw the soldiers then, moving among the crowd.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"People are leaving city."

"I know they're trying to leave," I said, "but—"

"They are leaving. People from Ulan Bator. They leave with trucks, horses, on feet."

"All of them?" I asked.

Bayan smiled slightly. "Not *all*. Soldiers still here, and others. Not everybody goes—many are still here. But enough go to cause worry."

"Why are they going?" I said, afraid I already knew.

"To wait for night. Ministers do not want tourists to follow. That is why the soldiers are here."

"Why would tourists want to follow them?" Even as I asked the question, I felt something stir inside myself.

"You do not know?" Bayan shook his head.

I bought a soda from him and headed toward the corner where my traveling companions were sitting. Sandy the lawyer had both his bags with him; Allen and bald Harvey hadn't brought any of their luggage. One deck of cards was on the table, and Sandy was shuffling a second.

"Sit down," Allen said. "We're playing some poker while we wait. Or maybe you'd prefer bridge."

"The bartender says Mongolians are leaving the city," I said.

"So we heard." Allen leaned back. "People aren't going to work, and there wasn't any breakfast served this morning. Apparently half the hotel staff didn't show up, either."

"Jesus," Harvey muttered.

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"I was listening to the BBC before I came down," Allen said. "They still don't know what those riders are. A few folks in other places are apparently leaving cities and towns, too, going out to wait for God knows what."

We played some five-card stud; Sandy kept track of the wagers. There didn't seem much point in talking. By noon, Harvey had won about forty dollars, I had lost ten, and Gil hadn't shown up. A couple of soldiers were at the bar talking to Bayan; I waited until they had left.

"I'll get us some drinks," I said as I got up. "I mean sodas."

"Nothing for me," Allen said.

"Me neither," Harvey added.

I went to the bar. "You sit here long time," Bayan said.

"We're waiting for our tour guide. He's supposed to come back from the airport and meet us here."

"He won't come back," Bayan said.

"Why not?"

"You people can go out from the airport, but cannot come back in. That is what my buddies from army told me. Soon they will make everybody leave the hotel."

I leaned against the bar. "Just where are we supposed to go?"

"To your embassies and wait. To the airport and train station and wait."

"For how long?"

Bayan shrugged. "Who can say?"

"I'll be honest with you, Bayan. I wouldn't mind staying, even under these conditions—for a while anyway. I wanted to come here for years, and all I've seen is Ulan Bator. And I keep thinking—" I was silent for a while. "What do you think we should do?"

His smile faded. He looked at me for a long time, as if trying to figure me out. I was beginning to feel uneasy when he said, "You are here. You say you wanted to be here. Now you are here when something important is about to happen." He paused. "I am leaving work soon. A dream came to me last night, of the horsemen. I will go out from city to see what will happen. I think you want to know what will happen there, too."

The sensible thing to do was to wait in the hotel until the authorities sent us somewhere else. The diplomatic community here would figure out how to get us home. Mongolia wasn't a hostile country; the most we would suffer was some discomfort before we were finally on our way. My brief adventure here would be over. If the visions continued to appear, and more of these people became convinced that they were a sign from their ancestor Genghis Khan, things could become unstable; it might not be possible for me to come back to this land again.

I thought of going home to another round of dinners, parties, and idle

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talk with other idle people until I grew depressed enough to plan a new trip with yet another guide to keep me safe. Maybe I would not even have that life for long if the sky riders were a sign that our world would soon change, or even end. There might soon be no safety anywhere.

"Bayan," I said, "I want to leave here with you. I'll go wherever you're going."

"I thought you would do that. You will have to leave your friends."

"Maybe they'll want to go, too."

"They will not go. They will say you are crazy to go with me."

Bayan was right about that.

We left in early afternoon with three of the soldiers, whom Bayan said were going off-duty. Gil had still not come back when we left; Allen was the only one who looked sorry to see me go. I had told Bayan that I would pay the soldiers and that he was welcome to my Walkman, but he seemed indifferent to the offer.

The soldiers had a jeep. There was little traffic on the streets except for a few other military vehicles. No one stopped us, and gradually it dawned on me that the soldiers might have left their post under false pretenses. Other soldiers had not questioned them when we left the hotel; their superiors must have thought that they were taking me to an embassy or to the airport. I was with deserters who could easily take me to some isolated spot and rob me of everything, but somehow I knew they would not.

I looked back. A few dilapidated cross-country vehicles were following our jeep, and soon there was a small convoy behind us. I expected to see a roadblock somewhere along the streets, or at least on the edge of the city, but apparently the authorities were more interested in keeping order among those staying in Ulan Bator. As we drove through one of the yurt suburbs, people gathered along the roadside, as if we were part of a parade.

Then we came to a sharp bend in the road, and rounded it; I looked out at the rolling land.

During the flight into Mongolia, I had been struck by the emptiness below. There had been almost no signs of human habitation, no roads, towns, buildings, or cultivated fields, nothing but barren hills, tiny white dots that turned out to be grazing sheep, and the occasional mushroom-like yurt seemingly planted in the middle of nowhere. It had seemed that the entire population of Mongolia must live in Ulan Bator, as indeed almost half did, and even the land surrounding the city seemed devoid of settlements.

Now there were yurts dotting the once empty land, as if another suburb

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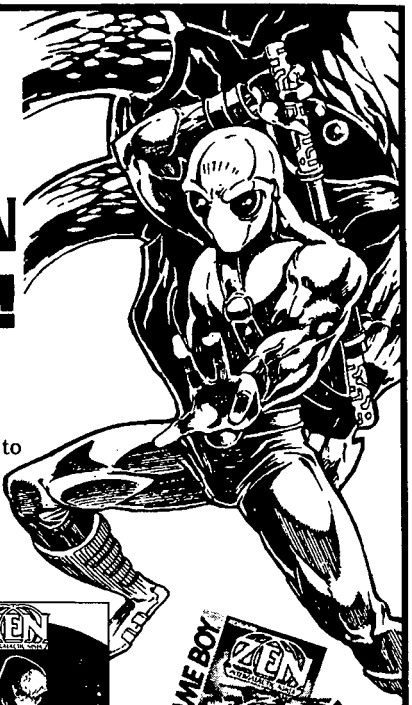

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of the round tents had sprung up overnight. Hundreds of people on horseback were streaming across the yellow grass, fanning out in all directions, and more were following them, their horses kicking up clouds of dust. I thought of the ancestors who had ridden out to their conquests.

"It is like Naadam," Bayan murmured.

"What?" I asked.

"Naadam, our National Day. People come here from all over to celebrate, and that is where they put their *gers*. But this is more important than Naadam. We must be here."

Something was calling to us; I knew it now, and was powerless to resist its call. My dream of the horsemen that past night had been part of it, and knowing that I had to come here with Bayan was part of it, too.

The jeep lurched forward.

There were no roads outside the city, only trails of ruts made by other vehicles that had crossed the land. The young man driving the jeep seemed to know which ruts he wanted to follow. By the time we had gone only a few miles, I was aching from the violent bumps of the ride.

Yurts were being raised around us. Men held up tent poles while other men and women adjusted the spokes attached to the roof wheel. People were securing the felt walls of their tents and then hurrying to other families to help them. There were horses everywhere, many of them tethered to ropes stretched between poles.

We drove on; I covered my nose and mouth with a handkerchief to keep out the dust. In a while, the air grew clearer again and I saw fewer yurts and people up ahead. My face was raw from the sun and the cold wind that was beginning to rise. The driver seemed to be heading toward a lone yurt on the horizon, barely visible against the late afternoon sky.

That was where we finally came to a stop, next to a battered truck parked near the tent. An old couple greeted us outside the yurt. The old man said a few words before leading us inside; Bayan told me that the two were the grandparents of one of his companions. By then, the sun was setting, huge and red.

"Three is very significant number," Bayan said to me. We were sitting near the dwelling's small iron stove, drinking a liquor he called *arkhi* from bowls encrusted with dirt. "Of course, so is nine."

This would be the third night we would see the horsemen, if they reappeared. Bayan's numerological reasoning did not impress me, and I suspected that even he was calling upon it only to convince himself that he was being logical, that he had not been compelled to come here by an irrational impulse. For he had been compelled, I was certain, as had his soldier friends and the crowds assembled in their city of tents. The old

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couple with us seemed barely able to walk, yet they were here. Bayan might lose a job that was surely a lucrative source of hard currency and other loot, and the soldiers could be facing the Mongolian equivalent of a court-martial for going AWOL and stealing a jeep, and still they had come. I risked almost nothing in comparison.

I drank only enough of the *arkhi* to be polite. The couple had brought no food, perhaps because of the shortages. I opened my carry-on and passed around some dried fruit; the others ate it passively.

Bayan said a few words in Mongolian, and then to me, "We go outside."

We left the yurt. The warm temperature of the afternoon had dropped precipitously; I pulled my coat closer around me. The stars hung in the sky like lanterns, set against a sky so clear and black and close that it seemed like the inside of a vast velvet-lined bowl that a giant might have reached up and touched.

I looked back. A few lights hung near the other yurts on the plain, or swirled in arcs and circles; some people had apparently brought lanterns and flashlights with them, but most of the plain was dark. One light was blinking on and off, as if the person holding it was sending a signal. The city of tents that had sprung up that afternoon seemed far away, nearly as distant from me as the sky.

Someone near me cried out. I looked up and saw the celestial riders coming out from Orion once more. They grew, covering the sky, moving more rapidly than they had before; their arms rose and fell as though they were whipping their steeds into a faster pace. Their transparent garments shone, casting a blue light over the plain.

My neck ached; as I lowered my eyes, a hand clutched at my shoulder. "Ah," Bayan said, waving an arm. I saw the horses then, standing out on an empty stretch of land to the west. There were at least nine of them, all larger and more massive than the small Mongolian breed, and their white coats had a bluish tinge. Perhaps they had strayed from their owners; they might be wild. I was sure they hadn't been anywhere near us until now.

Bayan said something I didn't understand, then began to run toward the horses. "Bayan!" I called after him.

"Come!" he shouted back. I took off after him, thinking that his friends would follow and help me restrain him. Suddenly, something swelled inside me; I felt as though the air filling my lungs would carry me aloft and make me soar over the ground. Then I was running easily, feeling that invisible cords were pulling me.

Bayan skidded to a stop near the horses. I was panting by the time I reached him, dizzy with the effort of running.

"Bayan," I gasped when I had caught my breath. The night was darker. I looked up; to my surprise, the horsemen above had disappeared. A

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muscle throbbed in my right thigh; I bent from the waist and rubbed at it with one hand.

One of the white horses neighed. A movement at the edges of my vision made me glance up; I tensed in surprise.

I saw a lone horseman. Bayan whispered a few words in Mongolian, and I knew he saw the rider, too.

The horseman was dropping toward us from the sky, and, as he fell, he grew smaller and smaller, until his horse touched the ground, and hoofbeats filled the silence. He rode toward us over the grass until his steed reared up and halted.

The strange man was roughly our size now. He looked Mongolian, and wore a long woolen tunic and baggy trousers. I was still, unable to move.

The horse whinnied softly; the man shifted in his saddle. I heard the clink of the necklaces hanging from the rider's neck, and smelled the sweat of his horse. Whatever the two had been while crossing the sky with the heavenly giants, they were now flesh and blood that I could reach out and touch.

Bayan raised his arms above his head. I did the same, not daring to call out or to flee back to our Mongolian companions.

"What are you?" I whispered at last, expecting no reply from the apparition.

"A warrior," he answered. "I am a man, after all." He held out his hands, palms up. "I come in peace."

His voice was low but hard, his words spoken with no discernible accent. Impossible for me to be able to understand him, impossible that he should have descended from the sky—yet there he was, and I needed no translator to know what he said. I looked at Bayan from the sides of my eyes, wondering if he had heard the man speak in English or Mongolian.

The rider might claim that he had come in peace, but he was well-armed. A bow in a leather case hung from his belt, next to his slightly curved sword, and his quiver was filled with arrows. I lowered my arms slowly, careful to keep my hands where he could see them. "Why are you here?" I asked.

"To ride in the places I once knew. It is a need." He made a fist, then struck his chest. "I still feel it, this longing for my old home."

His old home? How old could he be? I dimly wondered what he meant. The air was very still, almost too still, as if a barrier had already surrounded us and cut us off from the world. The nine horses near us were as unmoving as stone.

The man dismounted, walked toward us, and pulled two scarves out from under his tunic. "I come in peace," he said as he handed one scarf to Bayan and the other to me.

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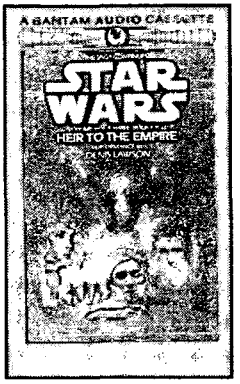

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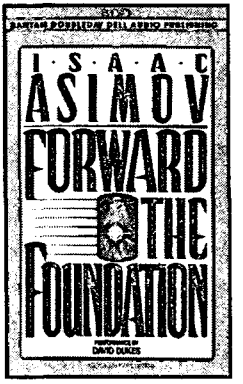

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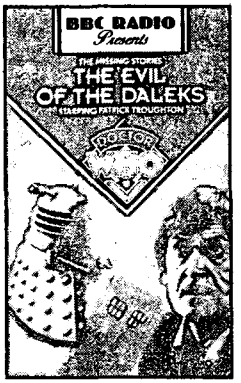

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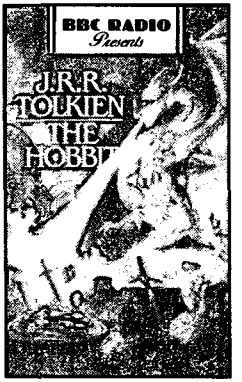

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Bayan murmured something in his own language. I hung my scarf around my neck. The man squatted, sitting back on his heels; I sat down in front of him as Bayan knelt. The visitor's face glowed; below his fur hat hung two coiled braids, and his trousers were tucked into thick boots. His cheekbones were sharper and his eyes fiercer than those of the placid Mongolians I had seen.

"You say this is your old home," I said. "What did you mean by that?"

"It was my home before the world grew small and we rode to Heaven." His expression seemed to soften a little, but his eyes were watching us keenly. I had the feeling that he saw everything about me—that I was tired and a bit out of shape, uncomfortable in the cold of this summer night—in short, no match for him. He was speaking to me easily, almost contemptuously under the layer of courtesy, because I was not a threat; somehow, I understood that. His eyes narrowed slightly as he peered at Bayan.

"I'm not sure of what you mean by saying this was your home," I said. The horseman turned back to me. "I would like to hear your story."

"I would as well," Bayan said in English, his voice trembling a bit.

The rider's mouth twisted into what might have been a smile. "In my camp," he began, "we had not forgotten the tales of our ancestors and their deeds. We remembered the time when nearly all of the world was our pasture, but our world had grown smaller since then. We were a poor people who had wealth only in memory. A man could ride over the steppe for days without seeing another man, and yet we knew how little it was compared to what we once had ruled. We were nothing to the world, only a patch of land lying between the territories of the people we had once conquered. The world was becoming too small for us, and we too small for it."

He was silent for a while. The horses near us had not moved, and I could hear nothing behind us.

"What happened?" I said at last. "How did you come to ride in the sky?"

"It was on a night like this. A circle of light shone down from Heaven, a circle so wide that it covered our camp. A few of my people were frightened, but I felt no fear. Is it not said that we fly to Heaven when we leave this life? The light was a sign from Heaven, calling us to it."

I gazed up at the sky for a moment, almost expecting such a light to appear again.

"A voice told us to mount our horses," he continued. "It was a voice no man with courage could disobey. Some people fled from our camp then, but most of us were quickly in our saddles. The light lifted us and our steeds, and as we rose, the world shrank until it was no more than one jewel among many set in the tent of Heaven. The trails we follow now

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are made of stars, and we ride along them as easily as we once did upon this grass. Heaven's campfires warm us, and we feed upon the warmth of suns." He lifted his head. "We are greater than we once were, and the Earth is even smaller than when we left her."

I was trying to absorb what he had told me, to make sense of it somehow. Something, long ago, had found this man and his people and taken them from their home here. I imagined strange beings, maybe the representatives of an advanced civilization, coming to Earth and carrying those Mongols away—to what? Were they now giants who roamed the sky, shrinking to their former size when nostalgia brought them to the surface of their old world? Was their size and scale something they could change at will, and was time something else they controlled easily? This man, whatever his powers, seemed to come from an earlier age, one in which the only proper role for a man was that of warrior and signs from Heaven were part of the natural order. I wondered how many centuries had passed since his departure and transformation.

"And you have come back," I murmured, "because you want to see your old world?"

"I have come back before, out of longing, as have many of my comrades. Before, only one might come, or two together, to ride the lands they once knew. A man looking up might see no more than the misty form of a horse among the clouds. But Earth has grown even smaller since our time. More of us have come to gaze down upon the world that no longer has space for the wanderer and his herds."

The night air was suddenly colder around me, my neck stiff with tension. The Mongol's face seemed to glow more brightly, as if a fire were lighting him from within.

I said, "Why are you here?"

He seemed to ignore my question as he said, "To put a man behind walls, to pen him up, to limit him to one small patch of grass, is to take away all that he is." He was on his feet in one swift movement. "Mount your horses!" he called out, and another voice seemed to echo his.

I abruptly found myself upon one of the white horses, with no recollection of having mounted the animal. I had no reins and no saddle, but had to cling to the horse's mane and dig my heels into its flanks.

Bayan was on the back of another steed. The horseman was quickly astride his mount, and then the plain was shrinking below us as we rode the wind. How small it was after all, that world I had roamed aimlessly, as though I might find some purpose for myself once I had encompassed it. Now I willed myself to leave it behind, to become something more, and my horse became the steed of my will, lifting me effortlessly. I looked away from that tiny blue pearl and followed the Mongol out across the plain of stars.

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My horse's hooves thundered across the starry ground. The horseman was leading Bayan and me over a vast steppe of light, yet I felt a wind against my face and thought I saw painfully bright blades of grass sprouting from the plain. It was as though the landscape I had left behind were somehow superimposed upon what I was seeing now, as if my mind was trying to make what I saw comprehensible to me. I was still myself, but grown immense. I could reach for one of the globes that hung in the blackness above me like ripe fruit and find myself holding a world in my hand.

More riders were ahead of us. I kept near Bayan and the horseman leading us, and then suddenly I was among the mass of riders, surrounded by men and women on horseback who seemed to change even as I gazed at them. Their faces glowed, growing brighter; their tunics and robes were adorned with nebulae. I could feel their transformation working inside me, my heart beating as the nourishing plasma of suns flowed through me.

I was a giant among the stars, able to roam through an infinite territory. Joy filled me as I realized that this journey would never have to end. A rider near me laughed, and the celestial ground shook with his laughter and mine. There was more ahead, stellar realms beyond this one, spaces to wander before memory and sentiment tugged at me again.

But there was also a longing inside me for what I had been, perhaps the same longing the horseman riding with me must have felt. I remembered my world, and felt fear. What was I becoming? What was it that had taken me and brought me here? I could not accept this; it could not be real.

My horse slid to a halt and reared, nearly throwing me from its back, and then we were falling as the plain of light spun around us. Clinging to my horse, I felt my will failing, my body shrinking into itself once more.

Earth swelled below me until I was caught by its clouds. I imagined myself shrinking into oblivion, becoming no more than a bit of dust, and my terror blotted out all thought. I cried out and found myself lying on grassy ground.

My head throbbed. I got unsteadily to my feet. The horse I had ridden was a few paces away, standing amid other white horses. I was near the yurt. The old couple and the three soldiers stood outside, staring past me.

I turned around slowly, and saw the horseman who had come for me, reduced once again to my size. He lifted his hand in what seemed to be a greeting. Bayan was nowhere in sight.

I was moving toward the horses when a wide shaft of light shot down from the heavens, illuminating the plain. In the distance, others were

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outside their yurts, gazing up at the sky. A few people on horseback or on foot were fleeing into the darkness beyond the bright circle, but more were running toward the light.

"Mount your horses!" The words were coming from the horseman who had guided me, but another, more resonant voice underlay his, a voice that echoed across the plain while speaking words I did not know.

The three soldiers went to the horses, followed by the old man and woman. The young men were quickly on their mounts; the old couple leaped upon theirs nimbly. All of them were smiling, their faces shining with light.

They grew into the sky, the hooves of their horses treading an invisible trail, and others caught in the circle of light followed them. A white light shone around all the riders and their horses as they receded from me. I watched them as they climbed the wind, until I lost them among the distant throng of titans storming the stars.

The plain was dark once more. A feeling of loss and despair overwhelmed me; I might have become one of them, and been riding among them. I was small enough for this world now, with only the memory of having been something greater. I gazed after the riders, watching them grow apparently smaller as they rushed toward Orion, becoming a glowing cloud, then a pinprick of light before winking out, leaving only the familiar constellations; and I realized that even with their mastery of scale, which gave them the power of seven-league boots, they could not overwhelm the interstellar deep. I suspected that even if they could do so, they would not; this was the way they wished things to be.

I did not belong among the horsemen. They had not come here for people like me, but for those our world had pushed aside. I wondered how many other riders had been drawn to a new life that night, what other forgotten people might have been carried away into the sky. The horsemen were gone, but I felt they would return, that this world would see them again when it was time for other nomads cast aside by history to join them.

The scarf the horseman had given me was still around my neck. I clutched at its soft woolen cloth, holding on to it with one hand as I walked toward the yurt.

Many of the Mongolians assembled on the plain had been left behind. At dawn, I climbed into the jeep and drove slowly along the ruts in the ground. The jeep ran out of gas near a group of yurts; a man was there, siphoning gasoline from an abandoned jeep to fill his small truck. He spoke no English, but understood that I wanted to return to Ulan Bator. I got back to my hotel in time to board a bus carrying tourists to the airport. From an Australian on the bus, I heard that people in other

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parts of the world—Bedouins, ethnic Cossacks, a few people in the countryside of France, a group of Indians in Nebraska—had been seen riding into the sky.

The riders have not appeared since then, but I find myself wondering if they will.

Somewhere among the stars there were intelligences capable of reaching into the heart of a people and giving them what they most desired. They had come to the Earth and found a joyous inner treasure among the Mongols, a graceful willfulness that had lost the means to fulfill itself, and they had given that strength what it needed. People I had seen as poor and passive had still possessed a spirit that those intelligences valued.

And I knew that I had nothing comparable inside myself, that I would never have the greatness of will and spirit to take me out to the starry steppe.

For me there would be no bright stars, because my heart was not bigger than the earth, I told myself bravely, almost believing that I was home where I belonged as I tried to accept the bars of my prison. ●

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ALCHEMICAL LESSONS

Sensation is fleeting,
no more than a greeting
and a good-bye.
Perception lasts longer,
binds more and binds stronger;
the brain beats the eye.
A pause for reflection, precise intellection,
the reach for perfection
that transcends the Fall,
but if it's illusion, instead of allusion,
(Greek Thinker's Delusion)
all this could be All.
Near blind in this ocean
of timebinding motion,
we see only bands,
slits in reality
cutting "supposed-to-be"
dead where it stands.
Who can count cronons, see angstroms & stars
dying in galaxies younger than ours?
Here we stand everywhere, all times are one;
nothing lies, nothing dies, nothing is done.
We of the magic remain yet move on,
each place is Everywhere, nothing stays gone.

—William John Watkins

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FULL CIRCLE

John Alfred Taylor

In our December issue, we published John Alfred Taylor's terrifying tale of "The Shorn Lamb." Mr. Taylor is currently at work on a horror science fiction novel and he has a story coming out in the horror anthology *Borderlands 3*. While one might expect his latest work to be another horror tale, it is instead a bittersweet, hard-science fiction gem.

At Edwards Air Force Base streets are named for test pilots who buy the farm. But none is named after Ted Kinzer.

Kinzer isn't mentioned in any history of the X-15 program. Flight numbers and dates have been changed to make him a nonperson, with other pilots on record for his flights. Everyone involved had to sign documents with terrible penalties for breaking security. Nobody still alive has gone public, because who'd listen except *The National Enquirer* or Geraldo?

And who noticed the X-15 test program then, with the Mercury and Gemini astronauts hogging the headlines?

The Air Force paid Kinzer's wife $50,000 to keep quiet, which was good money for the time. But Marge Kinzer waited two years before she went out with another man, and waited a third before she married again, waited just to be sure, just in case.

That was the end.

It began with Jim Roberts orbiting Chase-4 northeast of Edwards, waiting for visual acquisition after Kinzer's altitude flight. From what he'd heard so far everything was fine: Kinzer had had ignition right after launch without having to sweat and try again, his angle of ascent while the LR99 rocket engine kicked him in the ass was nominal, and when he cut the engine off the plane was still rising toward 280,000 feet, where the sky was black and he had to use reaction controls instead of rudders and stabilizers. Now Kinzer had come through reentry, descended past 70,000 feet, and was using the speed brakes to kill his velocity.

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"Acquisition yet?" said NASA-1.

"Not yet," Jim said, peering toward the northeast as he banked again. The X-15 was dark and hard to see.

Then the propellant dump contrail made a chalkline on the sky.

"I see you, Ted."

"Good to have a friend. How do I look?"

"Can't tell till we're closer." Roberts made a tight bank as the rocket plane went by. "I'm coming up on your right, Ted."

They went around the high key together, then turned back to come around for the approach.

"How do I look now?"

"Real good."

Kinzer did his landing flare and set the plane down. The X-15 bounced on its rear skids, slammed the nose gear down, bounced up and down again, and started its dust-plumed slideout along Runway 18-36.

Halfway down the runway they picked up Kinzer's last words:

"This is squirrely!"

By the time Roberts landed it was all over. The fire chief's red pickup, the ambulance, the mobile control van, the fire engine, and the other trucks and vehicles had closed on the X-15 as it slid to a stop, while the rescue helicopter hovered overhead. By the time Jim was able to catch a ride down the runway, the recovery crew had the canopy up and were almost finished shutting down the plane.

Kinzer was on a litter forty feet away, still in his pressure suit.

"What's happened to Ted?" Roberts asked as he pushed through the crowd.

"That's what we'd like to know," said a fireman, eyes wide and strange.

Then Roberts noticed how flat Kinzer's pressure suit was.

One of the recovery crew was kneeling beside the litter, his face greenish-white. "Kinzer's gone. There's nobody inside the suit. We opened his faceplate, and he wasn't there. Kinzer wasn't there."

Ted always looked forward to the moment they opened his helmet at the end of a flight, and he could finally breathe fresh air. But this time there was no smell of heat or dust when the faceplate popped up, no whiff of residual peroxide or anhydrous ammonia. The air was more like perfume, except it had a hint of hospital in it too.

And there was something about Peterson's face—

"Is anything wrong?" Peterson asked.

"No," lied Ted, squinting so he wouldn't seem to stare. It *was* Peterson, but his face was too smooth, overpoweringly three-dimensional, like a portrait painted in an exaggeratedly photo-realistic style. To change the subject Kinzer begged "Get me out of here."

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Ted looked over the shoulders of his helpers on the way to the suit van: the dry lake looked wrong too, but how he couldn't quite tell.

After he took off his gloves and boots and silver nylon coverall, they helped him with the rubber body suit. When that slid off his long johns much too easily, without struggle or sweat, he began to doubt his senses. "Is any of this real?" he asked the man who looked like Peterson. "Nothing seems quite right. Did I actually land at Edwards, or am I crazy?"

"Yes. And no and no," said the Peterson person. "I'm real, and you're not crazy. But you haven't landed at Edwards, and we don't look like this. The illusion of the familiar is meant to protect you from the shock of transition— Admirable how quickly you saw through it."

"So just where am I, in a flying saucer? On Mars or Venus?"

Peterson and the other two people in the van spoke as if they shared the same mind: "Much farther away. You are in a habitat in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, and nearly a million years into what you call the future."

"I don't believe it."

"Watch," said the Peterson. The side of the van disappeared. Fifty yards beyond the X-15 melted like wax, shimmered, and merged with the sunlit runway. Then the sky turned black over the bed of Rogers Dry Lake.

There were stars pressing in everywhere overhead, terrifyingly closer and brighter than Kinzer had ever seen, many more than on the clearest desert night. During the brief flight he had endured G-forces followed by vertigo as he rose into space and fell back, even heavier G-forces during reentry, but this was too much. Ted fainted.

Ted regained consciousness with Peterson's hand—if it was a hand—palm down on his solar plexus, as if charging him with vitality through his long johns.

Long johns—what a costume to wear into the future! And then he wondered. If everything else was unreal—Ted scratched surreptitiously. It hurt and no fabric caught his fingernail: naked was even worse than long johns. Or did it matter so much, if these three things talking to him weren't human?

"Feel better?" said the Peterson lookalike.

"Yeah," said Kinzer, sitting up, "better. So I'm really that far in the future?"

"Most certainly."

"And where did you say this was?"

"A habitat in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud."

"Just where's that?"

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"It's a companion galaxy to what you call the Milky Way roughly 800,000 light years from your home planet."

Kinzer almost fainted again. "Jesus. That's pretty far to snatch a person. But why me?"

"You were the nearest target."

"At 800,000 light years?"

"Nearest to our aiming point I mean. And we desperately needed an ancestral human specimen from Old Earth."

"Ancestral? You mean you're really human?"

Peterson's teeth were too perfect when he smiled. "Oh yes. I should have made that clear from the beginning, rather than leading you astray. But much changed, and still changing ourselves, which is why you are a specimen of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, while we are *Homo sapiens proteus*."

"I don't enjoy being called a specimen," Kinzer snapped. "Sounds too much like you'll be dissecting me next."

"Nothing so extreme. We'll just take a little of your blood from time to time."

"Vampires?"

The Peterson doppelganger closed his eyes momentarily before answering. "*That* demanded a long data search. Vampires indeed! No, we're not blood-sucking monsters. Only occasionally we'll want a tiny sample of your blood for genetic extraction and duplication."

One of the others continued, in a voice eerily similar to Peterson's: "The race needs ancestral genetic material very much, call it a foundation if you want to, a kind of graft from the ancestral taproot to replace everything blurred or lost over the millennia through genetic drift and engineering."

Even if he didn't know what genetic engineering meant, Ted wasn't going to argue. He had a more important question. "So once you get that, you can send me back, right?"

"No," they answered simultaneously. "Impossible."

"But you sent this time machine or whatever back for me—"

"Our 'time machine,' " the third one answered, "your name for something more subtle and unmechanical than you can imagine, was a complex and highly redundant interaction of elementary particles—all we could send back, because on the particle level past and future are only a matter of charge. And even that took the entire energy of a black hole."

"Black hole?"

"We'll explain later. Nothing more organized than particles can go back, nothing alive: life involves entropy, irreversibility."

"But you brought me forward. It was time travel. Like H. G. Wells."

"No," said the Peterson double. "Not like H. G. Wells. We *stopped* you. To use a crude analogy, it was as if we'd frozen you instantaneously, or

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more accurately frozen time for you, while what you call time went on around you at the usual rate. It still took a million years for us to bring you 800,000 light years, and before that almost as long for our beam to reach Earth."

"You mean you can't send me back?" Ted groaned. "There's no chance of sending me back?"

The Peterson shook his head, and as he did the illusion momentarily faded, revealing shifting lines and flecks of light across his real face and chest like neon tattoos. "No. We can't. As we said, there's no such thing as what you mean by time travel. There's absolutely no way to go back."

"That's not fair!"

"True. It isn't fair to you. But it was necessary."

The local specimens of *Homo sapiens proteus* tried to make it up to him. Someone was always near to keep Ted company, amuse him or take him on tours, whether Peterson (actually Arthan Pardos-Detene-33) or another member of his crew of handlers or nursemaids.

Their constant companionship reminded Ted of the watch kept to prevent a condemned man's suicide before his execution, except his unimaginably-remote descendants wanted to keep him cheerful and alive.

Reassuring, whether or not they had their own reasons.

Even with their company, he was terribly lonely, especially after the realization sunk in that the Earth he knew was a million years gone. Marge was dead, his fellow test pilots and flight crews dead, the United States of America one with the mastodon and sabre-tooth tiger.

Unlike earlier times he'd given blood, the genetic sampling had been gentle and unintrusive: instead of a needle a tiny flattened tentacle fastened itself painlessly over the inside of his elbow, with no visible wound or bruising afterwards. And according to Peterson, every bit of blood was quickly replaced by synthetic blood and nutrient.

Oh, he was precious to them indeed.

Gradually and gently they removed the protective illusion of Old Earth, layer by layer like peeling an onion, to allow him to adjust to this strange new world at his own pace.

The faces of the people he remembered from Edwards slowly dissolved, let him see the actual countenances beneath. Arthan was the first Ted got used to, with the pale firefly green moving across the almost metallic bronze of his skin. Eventually he could recognize each member of his entourage, no matter how constantly the light patterns on their faces changed.

The variety made it easier to tell them apart: some had long faces that were almost triangular, some were square, others round as Earth's moon. The colors of the shifting patterns reminded him of printed circuits,

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writhing blue or green, yellow-white, or red-orange, complementary or contrasting to the hue of the skin, whether midnight black, pale gold, bronze, jade green or blue. No wonder they called themselves *Homo sapiens proteus*.

First Ted saw only hints of their forms, and when he was allowed clear vision of their bodies, understood why they'd let him see faces first. Some variety in faces was expectable, but their bodily variation was beyond expectation, and clearer because they were naked, except for shifting patterns of what were either symbiotic insects or tiny machines.

Some had squat and wide physiques, others were so tall and thin they made Ted think of praying mantises. And a few seemed even more insect-like, having a short second pair of arms with delicate many-fingered hands sprouting below their shoulders. Arthan was one, though in his case wide shoulders and narrow hips made the added pair of arms seem almost normal. One of the women had two rows of nipples and except for the preternatural knowingness of her expression, reminded him of an animal: in the end, he opted for the Sphinx as the only possible animal.

Ted never saw a child, though that seemed less of an anomaly after he mentioned it to Arthan.

"But ask yourself how many children you saw in Dryden or the X-15 servicing area? This part of the habitat is an equivalent research facility. Very special. Sometimes dangerous."

"Am I the danger?"

Arthan nodded. "You are. Mostly psychological, though there is a faint risk of physical infection."

"Extinct ideas and extinct germs both, huh?"

"Correct."

At last they peeled the last level of illusion away, and let Ted see the habitat in actuality. This was the real shock, much more unsettling than the gradual revelation of faces and bodies: even if *Homo sapiens proteus* remained human, their living spaces were alien.

Wisely, they had kept up the appearance of Earth and its diurnal round after the first momentary revelation of stars over the sunlit surface of Rogers Dry Lake, to the point where Ted slept on what seemed to be a cot in one of the offices of the Dryden Flight Research Center every night. But now the flat walls curved and twisted, the cot slowly changed shape till he became used to nesting inside a clam shell with a top half that darkened as it closed over him whenever he decided it was night. If he sat up momentarily or felt the least bit claustrophobic the overhead would brighten gradually, opening the moment he moved toward the edge, while the nest rose under him to lift him out.

At first he excreted and showered in a convincing replica of a bathroom attached to the office, though eventually any spot in the wall of the room

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around the clamshell would bulge out the temporary equivalent of a stool or urinal at his thought. Also his nest cleansed him better than any shower, even brushing his teeth once he accepted its first tentative probings.

But the rest of the habitat was worse. Things changed between sleeps until Ted was unable to find his way around without a guide. A step or two might take him from a place with a ceiling of luminous mist to one where nothing was between him and the star-studded blackness of space.

Strangest of all was taking a spiral shortcut across a sphere like a tiny moon and walking upright in a 1-G field all the way. "Collapsed matter inside," Arthan said. "We use it to modulate the output from our black hole."

"Oh." (All Ted could say as he stepped across the cleated moon between the black metal trunks which might be antennas.)

Another time they skirted a pit that had appeared in the decking overnight. "Why no safety railings?"

Arthan smiled. "No need. Step closer and see."

Ted did, and felt a jangling inside his skull, escalating to pain when he experimentally pushed himself a few inches nearer. "Neat trick."

Food was the one completely familiar thing. The synthetic steak had the texture and sizzle of real beef, the coffee smelled like coffee, the peas tasted as if they'd just been shelled, there was whiskey and beer. Arthan explained they wanted to give him at least one firm link to his past to keep him sane. The room he ate in was rectangular, its windows showed Edwards outside, the table held linen and silver, even flowers sometimes.

Ted lost his appetite after another week.

Perhaps it started when Reetha smiled and began to hum at the same time Hurthan and Arthan did. Ted was used to two or three of them speaking in choral simultaneity—Arthan had explained it as computer interfacing, nothing like telepathy—but when they stopped humming Reetha began singing, at least Ted thought it was singing, even though the scale was wrong. When she stopped Arthan kept on beating time. After another minute or two Hurthan and Arthan improvised a duet of some sort, switching unpredictably between rhythmic talk and singing, until they merged with a ubiquitous steady drone, overlaid with complex percussion, that seemed to fill the habitat. Then voices came in from near and far, and he realized how isolated he was, no matter how *Homo sapiens proteus* tried to make him feel at home.

Ted grew more and more depressed.

He remembered walking his dog Skipper around the neighborhood when he was a boy. Skipper had been able to lift his leg and make any

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place his own, but Ted had no way to do that here, even with Arthan walking him on an invisible leash.

They noticed.

Reetha, who usually avoided physical contact, patted Ted on the shoulder, and asked him why he wasn't eating. She told him not to be downhearted when he said he was lonely. Then Hurthan hinted something nice was coming, and Arthan promised that soon there would be an end to his solitude.

Eventually Ted understood the hints and promises, when Arthan brought in the girl who looked like someone from the twentieth century into the special room while he was eating lunch. They'd done a good job on the hairdo, though her dress was somehow wrong. She reminded him of Marge a bit, not just the color of hair and eyes, but the way she moved as well. Perhaps that wasn't completely accidental. Anything to keep their specimen contented.

"This is Mary," Arthan announced.

Eventually he explained to Ted in private: "Mary is partly your clone [Arthan had to explain the term] but with a good deal of genetic variation. Her physical and mental development was accelerated, and she has been programmed with memories of a past she never had. Mostly based on your memories, scanned while you were sleeping."

But in the magic of the first moment Ted hadn't wanted to understand. He'd risen and bowed self-consciously. "Hello."

She'd blushed slightly. "Hello."

By the time she seated herself while he held her chair a second lunch had appeared on the table before her. Ted was used to this by now, and Mary took it as a matter of course.

After Arthan left the two talked haltingly at first, looking at each other more than they spoke, barely touching their food, but soon they were comfortable.

"It's been very frightening being brought so many years into the future," Mary said. "I'd be very lonely if it wasn't for you. They say you've been very lonely—"

"Yes," he whispered.

She glanced up at him. "But now you have me."

In the beginning it was wonderful. Ted and Mary told each other everything: about the time she crossed the street and got lost when she was five, how he decided to become a pilot watching planes land and take off at the local airport, having to limp back to his carrier after being hit by ground fire in Korea, how she made her own dress for the Senior Prom.

Ted showed her around the parts of the habitat he understood, and

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when she wanted grass and trees, Arthan arranged a picnic for them in a place Ted had never seen. One moment they were walking down a tunnel of open metal basketwork with space and stars above and below, the next they stepped through a wall of light and down a ramp into a park with glades filled with wildflowers and velvety turf between the trees.

"This is the place," Mary said a minute later, and Arthan grounded the chest that had been following at shoulder level. It opened like an origami flower, extruding a ground cloth, offering sandwiches and snacks on one shelf, chilled splits of champagne on another.

Arthan gave a hint of a bow before he turned back. "Enjoy yourselves. Press that button for music, turn it to select. If you want me, just call my name."

"Birds!" Mary exclaimed when they were alone. "Hear them?"

Ted could. And already he had identified the familiar shapes of oaks and beeches, though some of the flowers in the clearing were taller and brighter than anything he remembered. "Almost like home."

"They must have brought a little bit of home along with them," she murmured, "across so much distance, a million years."

Mary fiddled with the music knob while he opened the champagne. Ted winced inside, hoping she wouldn't find any samples of what *Homo proteus* considered music. Surprisingly, she soon had on a song by the Beatles, the new group she admired so much. Or more accurately, what had been the new group a million years ago. Something called "Norwegian Wood." Ted knew the song because the kid who lived next door in Mojave played it constantly.

The next few days were happy.

Till Ted mentioned the Cuban missile thing in passing, and Mary gave him a blank look and a smile. The missile crisis had been just a few years before he was snatched into the future—his squadron had been on prolonged alert, and Marge had told him about people cleaning out the supermarket shelves—people were still building fallout shelters.

So he tested her with an allusion to Dealey Plaza and the Book Depository. Again no response.

But Mary knew the words to "Norwegian Wood."

He kept testing her over the next day or two, and discovered that talking to Mary was like talking to a mirror with bits of backing gone. Though the mirror reflected most things perfectly, there were surprising voids.

Finally he forced Arthan to admit that Mary was a clone. "There are reasons for the gaps. First, we could only recover a fraction of your sleeping memories without endangering your sanity, because dreams and memory are intertwined."

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"So?"

Arthan said "Dreaming is essential to sanity. Take that for granted."

"If you say so."

Ted tried to keep acting the same with Mary after he learned what she was; either he succeeded, or she had been conditioned to accept him no matter what—it was impossible to tell. They still shared the clamshell bed, still picnicked among the trees and flowers.

But now Ted felt worse, even more alone.

Whether or not she noticed, Arthan certainly did. Sometimes his abductors knew so much Ted wondered if the clothes they'd made up for him at his arrival were more than clothes, giving them constant readouts on his physiology and mood.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have told you about Mary."

Ted thought that over for a moment. "No. It would have been worse if you hadn't, because I'd have kept wondering. At least this way I understand."

For many wakings it went on like that, with Ted grateful for Mary's company, but never certain if the answer to anything he said would be a nod of understanding or a bright, blank smile: like trying to walk a tightrope that stretched on forever.

The situation seeped into his dreams. He'd be explaining something to Mary—though *what* he never remembered—when her head would suddenly lengthen into a cow's long-eared, patient muzzle, or she would pull her mask of a face aside (with a noise like the door with creaking hinges on *Inner Sanctum*) and reveal a clockwork skull with chromed teeth and clicking eyeballs.

Finally Hurthan and Arthan and Reetha insisted on a conference.

Ted had just given another blood sample, and felt a little nauseated and dizzy in spite of the instant synthetic replacement. "So what do you want?"

"You're not happy here," Hurthan announced.

Ted frowned at that statement of the obvious. "You maybe want Gene Kelly singing in the rain?"

Reetha closed her eyes before answering. "A dancer in a movie of that title, I believe. What you called a musical comedy."

"*I'm happy again*," Hurthan sang, returned from the same data search.

"We think we can send you back to where you came from," said Arthan.

"You said it was impossible."

"It was," said Reetha. "Then."

"In a sense it still is," Hurthan added. "We can't send you back, we send you around."

"So what's that mean?"

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Hurthan frowned, trying to find the right words. "It means that if space-time is a closed system you can—circumnavigate it, so to speak."

"Like a clock face?" Ted said. "Sort of go to the end to get back to the beginning."

"Yes," said Arthan. "And past the beginning to your own time. The theory goes back more than a decade of your Earth-years. But the techniques for implementing it have just been developed."

"So how soon?"

"A ten-day or two."

"Than you'll know?"

"Then it will be doable," Arthan corrected. "We already know."

"What about Mary?"

Reetha touched his forearm. "Don't worry. Mary will be taken care of."

"All right. But don't tell her about my leaving just yet."

The next weeks were hard.

Ted kept wondering if they could really keep their promise, though Arthan murmured encouragement whenever he had a chance. Two or three times Mary caught him staring at nothing and asked him what was on his mind, and he dredged up some memory from his Korean War days or some other excuse.

"Tomorrow," Arthan whispered as Ted followed Mary in to breakfast.

Ted waited till he and she were sipping coffee afterward before telling her. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done—it took what felt like hours to get to the point, and when he did he felt ashamed—but at the end Mary merely nodded, and said, "Don't worry. I'll be all right."

Ted guessed she would be; Mary *was* different, a real triumph of what these people called genetic engineering.

Though next day she surprised him. After Arthan told him it was time, and they had a last long kiss, she stopped Ted for a second, lifting her hand up beside her cheek to detach an earring. She held it for him. "To remember me by."

"Then you'll only have one."

"We'll both have one, to remind us we were a pair."

Ted's eyes burned with unshed tears and his throat was too choked for him to talk while he tucked the earring in the pouch at his belt—*Homo proteus* might have been willing to make him clothing, but hadn't gone as far as pockets—then he nodded and joined Arthan and the others waiting outside.

They led him through a side hall he'd never been through before and into a glowing circle on the floor. As he started to levitate Ted looked up at a corresponding hole in the ceiling. Arthan smiled beside him. "A new experience?"

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Ted grinned back, calm but exhilarated. "You bet."

The group rose more than a thousand feet, before gravity changed and they turned over neatly in midair and landed on a ring cantilevered out around the top of a blunt cylinder yards across with a spidery bridge leading to the center. Instead of railings the platform had what might be control boards around its inner and outer circumferences.

The rest stayed behind while Arthan and a lean, big-headed person he'd never met before escorted him across the bridge. On the way he saw that the cylinder below was surrounded by spiraling coils that smoked with cold.

They descended a ladder under a raised door like a bulkhead, with Ted getting heavier every rung he went down, which meant there had to be collapsed matter somewhere underneath. Finally they were in a tiny hollow, the inside of a sphere with walls two feet thick.

Arthan told him to strip, he had to go as naked as he came.

Ted stared for a moment before he obeyed, realizing he couldn't take back even the earring Mary had meant for a remembrance. Then he shrugged and took off the belt with the pouch, handed it and the rest of his clothing to Arthan.

Once Ted was naked the stranger eased him into a metal chair, hooked tentacular wires and transparent tubes to his face and chest and groin.

"Goodbye, Ted Kinzer," Arthan said, riding the retracting ladder up. A door in the shape of a truncated cone plugged the hole in the sphere once they were gone.

He waited, barely breathing.

A momentary flicker, and he was in the plane again, waiting for the recovery crew to open the canopy. Then Peterson leaned in and popped the faceplate, and Ted smelled dust and ammonia.

There was something about Peterson's face, things didn't look quite right—

Increase stimulus rate, said a voice Ted almost recognized, then forgot he'd heard.

He felt weird. Had something happened during the flight, something scary? No, it had to be just a dream, like most dreams one couldn't remember.

Marge was waiting when Ted came out of the suit van, smiling bright as the sun. She opened her arms.

Increase stimulus rate. ●

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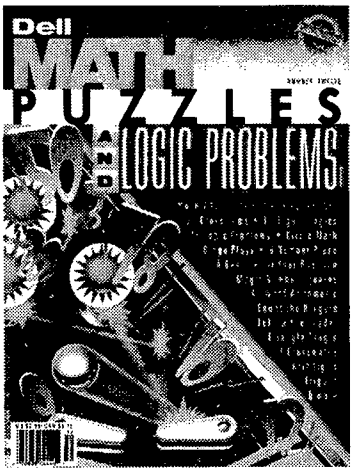

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Lisa Goldstein's beautiful short story "Alfred" (*Asimov's*, December 1992) was a recent finalist for the 1993 World Fantasy Award. "Midnight News," another of her stories from *Asimov's*, has been published in the *Norton Book of Science Fiction*. Ms. Goldstein's next book, *Summer King, Winter Fool*, will be out from Tor in May. Tor is also reprinting her novel, *Tourist*, in September, and they plan to release a collection of her short stories sometime next year.

art: Steve Cavallo

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RITES OF SPRING

Lisa Goldstein

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I'm sitting at my desk catching up on paperwork when there's a knock on my office door. "Come in," I say.

The door opens and a woman steps inside. "Have a seat," I say, filing one last piece of paper.

"Are you Ms. Keller?" she asks.

"Liz Keller. And you are—"

"Dora Green." Wisely, she picks the more comfortable of the two office chairs. "I want you to find my daughter."

I look across the desk at her. She has an oval face, dark gray eyes. Her hair is medium-length and black, with a little gray at the temples. She doesn't look much like a parent of a missing child. She doesn't play with the handles of her purse, or light a cigarette. I nod, encouraging her to go on.

"My daughter's name is Carolyn—Carolyn Green," Ms. Green says. "At least it was. I suppose her husband's made her change it."

I try not to frown. In most missing children cases the child is much younger. "Are you sure she wants to be found?" I ask.

"I'm certain. Her husband forced her into the marriage, you see."

"Was she pregnant?"

She doesn't flinch. "No."

I look over this possible client for a moment. She's very well dressed—she wears a soft green pullover and a skirt with a print of entwining leaves and vines and flowers. I remember that it's St. Patrick's Day today, though I would bet that she's not Irish. She smells a little like some flower too, a subtle, expensive perfume. Golden earrings dangle from her ears.

"Look," I say. "Before I can take your money I need you to be clear about some things. I can promise to do my best to find your daughter. Whether she wants to be found is up to her. I'll give her a message from you, whatever—"

"She has to get away from him."

"I can't do that. Your daughter's of legal age—She is of legal age, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"All right then. If she tells me herself that she wants to end the marriage—"

"She does—"

"Then I'll help her. But not otherwise. If she won't leave him I can give her the name of a women's shelter. I know a counselor there. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I need to know some things about your daughter—her husband's name, their last address if you know it. Do you have a picture of them?"

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She does. The photograph she shows me must have been taken shortly after the two eloped: the daughter is wearing what looks like a bridal wreath, a circlet of flowers. She is beautiful, with light brown hair and blue eyes. I can't tell what she's thinking; she has the vacant expression of the very young. Her mother seems to have gotten all the wisdom in the family.

Her husband looks nearly twice her age. He is unsmiling, almost grim. He has long greasy hair, a short beard, and wears a black leather vest over a T-shirt. He stands a little in front of her, casting her partly in shadow. "What does she do?" I ask.

"Nothing, as far as I know," Ms. Green says. "He won't let her leave the house."

"What about him? He looks like a Hell's Angel."

"I wouldn't be surprised." For the first time she looks away from me, down toward her lap. She smoothes her busy skirt. "I don't like to think about it."

"How long has she been with him?"

"About four months. They got married right after they met."

"Where did she meet him?"

Ms. Green looks away again. "She says it was in a park."

We talk a little more, and then I give her my standard contract and explain about my fees. She signs the contract and writes a check for my retainer.

As soon as she leaves the nausea I've been fighting the past few weeks returns. I run down the hallway to the bathroom and make it just in time to throw up into the toilet. As I stand and catch my breath I wonder why the hell they call it morning sickness. Mine seems to go on all day.

I make my way back to the office. I've got to do something about this, I think. I've got to decide. I flip through the calendar on my desk. The doctor's appointment is in two days, on March 19.

Dora Green had given me the last address she had for Carolyn and her husband, and had told me that her daughter had been taking classes at the university. It's past four o'clock, though, and in this sleepy northern California town the university is probably closed for the day. I decide to visit Carolyn's neighborhood.

Before I leave I call a contact in the Department of Motor Vehicles and ask her to run a check on Jack Hayes, Carolyn's husband; on Carolyn Green; and on Carolyn Hayes. Then I pick up my coat and purse, lock the office door, and step out into the hallway.

The landing smells even worse than usual, frying grease and floor polish. They say that your sense of smell improves when you're pregnant, but in the past few weeks I've discovered that this doesn't nearly go far

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enough. What I think actually happens is that your entire skin becomes a giant olfactory gland.

The temperature outside is in the thirties, and the sun is barely visible through the clouds. It's the coldest March people in this town can remember. Wind burns my ears. My well-dressed client, I remember, wore a plush padded overcoat. I wrap my thin cloth coat around me and get into my car.

The car's heater kicks in just as I drive up to Carolyn's address. I sit in the car a moment longer before going out to face the cold. Iron bars front the windows of some of the houses around me; other houses are boarded up or burned out or covered with graffiti. Five or six teenage boys walk down the street, drinking something from a paper bag and laughing loudly. An old man stands at a bus stop, talking angrily to himself.

I turn off the car and step outside. The wind chills me almost instantly, and I huddle into my coat. The address Ms. Green gave me is an apartment building, and I see the apartment I want facing the landing on the second floor. I climb the outside stairs and knock. Music plays from the first floor.

There is no answer. I knock again, louder. The door to the nearest apartment opens and a man steps out. "What the hell do you want?" he asks. "Can't a man get a little sleep around here?"

Despite his words he is not angry—he sounds weary, as if he has been certain something would wake him up sooner or later. His blond hair is lank and greasy, his face an unhealthy white. People pay a lot of money to get jeans as scuffed as his are, with just those holes at the knees. He might—just might—have a night job, but the odds are against it.

"Do you know Jack Hayes?" I ask. "Or Carolyn Hayes?"

"No. Who the hell are they?"

"They live here, in this apartment. Or they did."

"Oh, those guys." He leans against his doorjamb, suddenly disposed to talk. I see now that he is younger than I first thought, in his early twenties. A child somewhere in the building cries, and someone shouts for quiet. "Those guys were weird, let me tell you. They belonged to some cult or something. Satanists."

"Satanists?"

"Yeah. They had all these people coming and going at all hours of the day or night, all of them wearing black. Lots of chanting, lots of strange smells. Incense, maybe."

I sniff the air. There is a whiff of something, though it's harsher than incense. My stomach roils.

"You said 'had,' " I say. "Past tense. Are they gone?"

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"I don't know, man," he says. "Now that you mention it I haven't seen them around for a couple of days. Weeks, maybe. You a bill collector?"

I give him one of my cards. He squints at it, as though he has grown unused to reading. "Private investigator, huh?" he says. "Isn't that dangerous, you being a woman and all?" He smiles, as if he thinks he's said something witty.

"Asking personal questions is always dangerous," I say. He squints again; he knows that I've insulted him, but for the moment he doesn't get how. "Call me if they come back, all right?"

He mumbles something and retreats back into his apartment. I try Carolyn Green's doorknob, but the door is locked.

I drive back to the office. There is a message on my machine from my contact at the DMV: she can find nothing for any of the names I gave her. I frown. It's hard to get around in this town without a car, though it is just barely possible. So much for the Hell's Angel theory—I had specifically asked her to check for motorcycle licenses. Maybe they're using aliases, I think, and I frown again.

I had been looking forward to finding Carolyn, to discovering why she had run away with such an unsuitable man. One thing I learned in this business is that people are far stranger than you would ever think, that they almost never do what you would expect. Now I wonder if I'll ever get to meet her.

The next day I wrap myself in my coat and two scarves and head out toward the university. It's even colder than yesterday, and a heavy rain begins while I'm driving. The rain turns into snow as I pull up to a parking garage. It hasn't snowed in this town since I moved here ten years ago.

I show the woman at the registrar's office my PI's license and ask about Carolyn Green. "I'm sorry," she says, shaking her head. "It's against university policy to give out information on students."

She doesn't look sorry at all; she seems delighted to be able to enforce a rule and cause trouble at the same time. Her face is unremarkable, with faded blue eyes and sprayed straw-colored hair, but her glasses are unfortunate—narrow and black, with upswept tips. She must have been in a terrible mood the day she visited the optometrist.

The office is overheated; I shed first one and then the other scarf, and open my coat. I try an appeal to the woman's emotions—missing daughter, frantic mother—but she is unmoved.

It feels good to leave the office, to walk down the hall and push open the door to the cold outside. The snow has stopped. Students are scraping up the thin snow and trying to make snowballs. Someone slips on the grass and goes down; his friends laugh. I'm not foolish enough to think

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that I'll run into Carolyn Green, but just in case I stop several people and show them her picture. No one recognizes her.

I go to the student store to buy a pair of gloves, and then return to the registrar's office. I'm in luck—Ms. University Policy has left, probably for lunch, and a young woman who looks like a student has come in to replace her. Her eyes widen as I show her my license, and before I even finish my story she is calling up Carolyn's name on the computer.

"Here—I'll give you a print-out of her schedule," the young woman says. "And here's her address, at the top."

The address is the one Ms. Green gave me, but the list of classes could be useful. I thank the woman and leave.

The first class on Carolyn's schedule is Classical Literature, taught by Professor Burnford. Once again I am amazed at how strange people are, how complex. Who would have thought that the woman in the photograph would be interested in such a thing?

I find the building where Carolyn studies Classical Literature and go inside. Professor Burnford's office is on the third floor; a sign on the door says that his office hours are from 12:00 to 2:00. It's five to 12. I lean against the wall to wait.

A few minutes later the professor comes toward me, followed by a student who tries in vain to keep up with his long strides. Burnford says something over his shoulder to the student following him. "Rabbits!" I hear him say as he reaches the door. "Rabbits are fertility symbols!"

Burnford nods to me as I step forward, and without stopping he says, "I can see you after I talk to Joe here. Late Etruscan burial customs, isn't it?"

It isn't, but before I get a chance to tell him so he's unlocked his door and ushered poor Joe inside. I wait a bit more, and then wander down the hallway and read the notices and cartoons posted on office doors. It's all fairly interesting, in a sort of anthropological way. I never finished college myself.

Five minutes later Professor Burnford's door opens and Joe emerges, looking wrung out. He does not meet my eyes as he leaves.

"Sit down," Burnford says as I enter. His hair, eyes and skin are very nearly the same sandy color, and he wears a sand and black hound's-tooth coat. I wonder if he matched his coat deliberately to his face or if it's just a coincidence.

"I hope you don't mind if I eat my lunch while we talk," he says. He opens a brown paper bag and takes out a plastic-wrapped peanut butter sandwich. "I have no time otherwise."

The mention of lunch, and the smell of peanut butter, make my stomach turn again. The doctor's appointment is tomorrow, I think.

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"I'm sorry," he says, taking a bite of the sandwich. "I don't remember your name."

"I'm not a student here, Dr. Burnford," I say. I take out my license and show it to him. "I'm looking for one of your students. Carolyn Green, or Carolyn Hayes."

He nods, his mouth full of peanut butter.

"Do you know her?" I ask.

"Of course I know her. Brilliant girl. You don't get too many undergraduates that good in ancient Greek."

Brilliant? I show him the photograph. "Yes, that's her," he says, taking it from me. "Don't know who the man is, though."

"That's her husband," I say. "Jack Hayes."

"Husband?" He puts down his sandwich, for which I am grateful, and wipes his mouth with a napkin. "So that's what happened to her. I'm sorry to hear it."

"What do you mean?"

"She stopped coming to class a few months ago. I don't usually stick my nose in my students' business, but I was worried about her and I went to the registrar's office to get her phone number. She doesn't have a phone, it turns out."

I nod. I had already noticed that.

"So I thought, that was that," he says. "Husband, you say. Sometimes you get a man who'll pull his wife out of school, even in this day and age."

I say nothing. He'd be surprised if he knew what goes on in this day and age.

He gives me the photograph back. "Shame," he says, shaking his head.

"Do you know anything about her?" I ask. "Any friends you might have seen her with? Acquaintances?"

"No. I never saw her outside of the classroom or my office."

I thank him and leave. The professors of her other two classes aren't in, so I scribble something on the backs of two business cards and push them under the doors. As I drive back to the office I turn on the radio; someone is explaining how to put on snow-chains.

There are two messages waiting for me at the office. A company I've worked for before asks me to run a credit check, and a friend wants to go see a movie tonight.

I should call both of them back. Instead I take out a legal pad and write down columns of numbers. Stroller, car seat, crib, play-pen. So much for clothing, so much for medical expenses. College, and classes in Classical Literature with Professor Burnford. I'm staring at the pad of paper when the phone rings.

I let the machine catch it. "I'm sorry I was angry with you the other

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day," a voice says, much to my surprise. "We should talk. Please call me."

It's my mother. She's wrong, though; we have nothing to talk about.

"Your test results came back," the doctor says. "They're positive."

I take a deep breath. "That was quick," I say.

"Oh, we're very efficient these days," she says. She smiles; I guess she's trying to put me at ease. "We don't have to kill rabbits anymore."

For some reason this makes me think of Dr. Burnford, shouting at his student about rabbits and fertility symbols.

"Can I ask—" The doctor pauses. "Is this welcome news?"

I've checked the box marked "Single" on the intake form. "I don't know," I say slowly. "It was a one-night stand, really. A friend came into town unexpectedly. I don't—"

The vastness of what I've gotten into hits me; I have to stop and take another breath. I'm not going to break down in front of this woman, though; I'm not going to treat her the way my clients sometimes treat me, as if she's a wise-woman capable of solving all my problems. If I start I'll end up telling her about the screaming fight with my mother, about all my doubts, about God knows what else. "I'd just like some time to think about it," I say.

The doctor nods. She puts me up in those awful cold stirrups and examines me, and then, when I'm dressed, gives me some vitamins and a list of foods I should and shouldn't eat, and a pamphlet on abortion. "Do you need to talk to someone?" she asks. "I can recommend a good counselor."

I can't remember the number of times I've said the same thing to my clients. I've always prided myself on my ability to manage my own life, to stay out of the kinds of messes my clients seem to get into. I shake my head.

Dora Green is waiting for me in front of my office. I nod to her and unlock the door. "I wanted to know if you made any progress," she says.

I feel very weary. It's far too early for her to expect results. I motion her inside the office and sit at my desk. "I'm sorry," she says, taking the chair opposite me. Today she's wearing a green print dress that's even busier than her skirt, more leaves and flowers and what looks like little animals peering through the foliage. "I should have waited."

"Your daughter seems to have moved, and she's stopped going to classes," I say. "Other than that, I can't tell you anything yet."

She nods. Her calm expression does not change. I wonder if she's had the same thought I had, that her daughter is dead, killed by her husband. Satanic rituals, I think.

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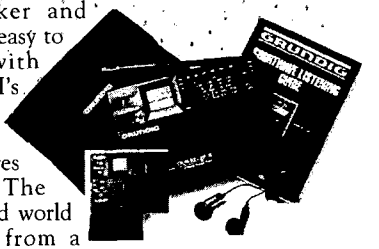

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"I'm meeting someone for lunch," she says. "You must be hungry too. Can I get you something to eat?"

You're supposed to eat enough for two when you're pregnant, but at the same time you're usually sick to your stomach. Just another example, I think, of how impossible the whole thing is. "I've already eaten," I say.

For a moment I think she knows I'm lying; worse, that she knows everything about me, including where I went this morning. I have never felt this way about any of my clients; usually it's the clients who feel the need to justify their behavior.

"Come with me anyway," she says, smiling a little.

The animals on her print dress are moving. I shake my head, trying to focus, but the hallucination doesn't go away. A badger or something shoulders aside a flowering vine and pads forward, its nose twitching.

I look away. I'd better eat something. "All right," I say, and we head out into the street.

She stops at a restaurant a few blocks from my office, and we go inside. I have never seen this place before; probably it's new. There are posters of flowers on the walls, and vases filled with bright flowers at the table.

Her friend is already there. "This is Mickey," Ms. Green says as we sit down. "Mickey, this is Liz Keller."

Mickey nods at me, amused at something. He is slender, with curly blond hair and light gray eyes. There is a slight family resemblance, and for a moment I think he is Carolyn's brother. But surely Ms. Green would have told me if there were others in the family. I wonder who he is, how they know each other.

The waitress comes soon afterward. I study the menu, trying to remember the list of foods the doctor gave me. I could use a cup of coffee, but I'm almost certain the doctor would disapprove. "I'll have some tea," I say.

The waitress takes the rest of the orders and leaves. "How do you know Ms. Green?" I ask Mickey.

"We're related," he says. "Cousins. What about you? How do you know her?"

"She's hired me in a professional capacity," I say. It's all I can tell him without breaking my client's confidentiality.

"Ah," Mickey says. "You're the new detective."

"New detective?" I say, looking at Ms. Green. The animals on her dress are motionless now, thank God. "You didn't tell me about this. What happened to the old one?"

"She wasn't very good," Ms. Green says.

"And time is running out, isn't it?" Mickey says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

We're interrupted by the waitress, bringing food for Mickey and Ms.

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Green and a teapot and cup for me. "So," Mickey says. He reaches over and pours me some tea. "What have you found so far?"

"I can't discuss it without my client's permission," I say.

"Oh, Mickey's family," Ms. Green says. "You can tell him anything you tell me."

I sip my tea, enjoying the warmth. My stomach feels fine now. I remember the first time I met Ms. Green, when she came to my office to hire me, and how the nausea had disappeared then too.

I tell Mickey about my trip to Carolyn's old apartment, my visit to the university. He's still smiling. I'm almost certain he's hiding something, that Ms. Green is wrong to trust him. He seems to feel very little concern for his missing cousin.

He pours me another cup of tea. "What do you plan to do now?" he asks.

It's a good question. I've pretty much run out of leads, but it doesn't do to say so in front of the person paying your salary. I take a sip of tea. "Did you know her husband?" I ask him.

"A little," he says.

"Did you like him?"

Mickey laughs. "Like him? The boyfriend from hell?"

"Why do you think she married him?"

He shrugs.

"They seem very different," I say, pushing him.

He pours more tea. I look at the small teapot; it can't possibly hold that much. I lift the lid. It is filled to the brim.

I look up quickly at Mickey. He's grinning, as if daring me to confront him. "How did you do that?" I ask.

"Do what?" he says.

He must have switched teapots somehow, maybe while I was looking at Ms. Green. "Got to fly," he says. He stands and kisses Ms. Green on the cheek. "It was good seeing you."

I watch him go. My earlier suspicions of him become a certainty; he knows something he's not telling. "I've got to go too," I say. I stand and hurry through the restaurant, trying to keep him in sight.

He hasn't gotten that far ahead of me. He turns left out the door and heads east. A few miles farther on is Carolyn's old apartment. I drop back a little, keeping him in sight. Surely he doesn't intend to walk the entire distance.

He continues on for about a mile. The neighborhood slowly changes; the shopfronts here are dingier, and several of them are boarded up. Some of the buildings are painted three or four colors in a vain attempt to cover the graffiti; they look as if they have mange. A man moves to block me, his hand held out. "Spare change?" he asks.

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I sidestep him and continue on. Mickey is still in front of me. He is hurrying a little, as if he's getting closer to his destination.

He comes to a corner. He stops for a moment, as if trying to make up his mind. Then he turns and looks directly at me, grins, and goes right.

I take the corner after him. I've never had anyone spot me, never, not in any of the dozens of tails I've done. How had he known?

There is no one at all on the street. Grimy warehouses face each other, some protected by corrugated doors or iron gratings, all of them locked. One warehouse has rows of tiny windows on the second floor; about half of them are broken, as if they'd been the target in some game. Trees with branches like sticks line the street. No one seems to work here.

I walk up and down the street for over an hour, looking for Mickey in likely and unlikely places, but he is gone.

I go back to my office to get Ms. Green's phone number. I need Mickey's address, need to ask him a few questions.

The phone rings as I'm paging through my files. I pick it up. "Liz Keller, Private Investigations," I say.

"Liz?" the voice at the other end asks.

It's my mother. I don't need this right now. "What?" I say.

"Did you get my message?"

"Yeah."

"I want to talk to you. I want—I changed my mind. I had no right to interfere with anything you do. It's your life."

"I've always thought so."

"Did you see a doctor?"

She promises not to interfere, and then the first thing she says is interfering. "Yeah," I say.

"What did—"

"The test is positive." Even over the phone lines I can feel her straining to ask a question. "I haven't decided what to do yet."

"Did you think about what I said?"

"No."

"If you're going to have a child—"

"I thought you said you weren't going to interfere."

"Well, I just thought that you could take less dangerous work for a while. At least until the child is born."

"I've told you before. This is what I want to do."

"I know that. I'm not saying you should stop being a detective. But maybe you could take different cases—"

I sigh loudly. My mother has never held a job in her life, and yet she thinks she knows everything about everything. If she meets a jeweler she'll talk with great authority about gemstones. If she meets a car

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mechanic she'll go on about what the best makes of cars are. You can't correct her misconceptions; she feels absolutely no embarrassment when she finds out she's wrong.

Now she wants to tell me how to run a detective agency. "There are no safe cases," I say. "You can never tell how a case will turn out."

"Well, then, maybe you can stop—"

"No."

"I've talked it over with your father—we can afford—"

I hang up. Next thing she'll suggest I move back in with her and my father, into the old bedroom they've kept for me all these years.

Angry now, I pull Dora Green's file. I start to dial her number and then change my mind. I'm going to go visit her. If Mickey's been hiding something then who's to say she hasn't been? What do I really know about her anyway?

I put on my coat and two scarves and leave the office, slamming the door behind me. My stomach has started to feel queasy again.

There are huge plants on Ms. Green's lawn, pushing up against her outside wall. Somehow they have managed to put forth a few leaves, though the trees on the sidewalk are bare. I ring her doorbell, wondering what it is about this woman and flowers.

Her house is light and warm, with wooden beams and hardwood floors, and, of course, pots of plants placed to catch the sun. Red and green and blue weavings cover the backs of white couches and hang from the walls. She leads me to one of the couches and sits across from me.

Once again I notice how calm she is, how composed. There is a stateliness to her that I don't associate with the parents of missing children. "Have you found my daughter?" she asks.

"No, not yet. But I have found—well, I wonder how much you know about Mickey."

"Mickey?"

"Yes, your cousin. He didn't seem very concerned about Carolyn at the restaurant. I wonder if he's holding something back."

"Mickey." She sits back on the couch and smoothes down the edge of the weaving. "I've been thinking the same thing myself. I think that's one of the reasons I asked you to lunch, so you could meet him and form your own impressions. I don't think he's telling me everything he knows."

"Do you have his address?"

"Yes, of course." She recites his address from memory. It's in a very mixed part of town, with apartment buildings and middle-class houses and small neighborhood shops all jumbled together. It's miles from the warehouse district he led me to this afternoon.

I thank her and start to leave. "Take care of yourself," she says.

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Once again I get the unsettling feeling that she knows all about me. For a moment I want to tell her everything, to pour out the things I held back from my mother and the doctor. Why on earth did Carolyn Green run away from a mother like this?

Suddenly I realize that it's not the financial aspects of having a child I'm worried about. That would be tough, but I can handle it. What I'm terrified of is being the kind of mother my own mother was, interfering, small-minded, unable to let go. What other example do I have?

As I go back to my car I see that the streetlights are starting to come on. I've wasted more time than I thought following Mickey. I go home, and turn the heat up as high as it will go.

The next day I am parked across the street from Mickey's house. There is a car in the driveway, a late model Mercury. He might be out on one of his long walks, but I gamble that the car means he's still home.

Time passes slowly. My car is freezing, but I can't risk turning on the engine to start the heater. Finally the front door opens and Mickey steps out. He passes the car in the driveway and heads for the sidewalk. Another walk today, I think.

I let him get half a block ahead of me and then ease open the car door. This time I am certain he hasn't seen me. He walks slowly, as though he has no destination in mind; it is easy enough to keep him in sight.

He continues this way for several miles. He shows no sign of stopping. Finally he turns down a main street and I see that he is heading toward the warehouse district he visited yesterday. He is moving faster now.

I follow, hurrying to keep him in sight. He comes to the corner at which I lost him and turns. I take the corner after him. He is still in front of me, moving very fast now, almost running.

The rain starts again, lashing the bare trees. He goes halfway down the street and pushes on one of the warehouse doors. I run after him, but by the time I get there the door is closed. I try it; it opens with only the slightest squeak of rusty metal.

I step inside and close the door quickly. The first thing I notice is the smell of corroded metal. I can see nothing; even minutes after I have shut the door the warehouse is pitch dark. I can hear nothing either, not Mickey, not anyone he has come to meet. After a few minutes I make out the distant sound of water dripping on metal.

A flare burns suddenly across the room, too dim to reach me. I move toward it cautiously, keeping close to the shadows by the wall.

As I get nearer I see two huge chairs made of rusted metal. One is empty; a man sits in the other. It is too dark to tell, and I am too far away, but I am almost certain he is the man in the photograph, Carolyn's husband. The sight of the empty chair makes me uneasy.

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The light flares higher, and now I see Mickey among the shadows, standing before the man in the chair. The man wears a crown made of iron; its points catch the flames and glow red.

I feel the nudge of an elusive memory, a story I once heard or a lesson I learned in school. I know this place: the dark hall, the two chairs, the harsh smell of rusting metal. But before I can remember it fully the man in the chair speaks.

"Greetings, cousin," he says. "What news do you bring me from the upper world?"

"She knows nothing," Mickey says. "She is unable to find her daughter."

"Good. Her daughter is mine, gained by lawful means."

"Of course," Mickey says.

The red light erupts again. The shadows fall back. The man in the chair looks up and sees me. "Who is that woman?" he asks.

I turn and run. I find the door to the outside, but it is stuck, locked. I am still pulling on it when Mickey comes up behind me.

"Come, Liz," he says. "This is no fit way to greet the King of Hell."

I turn and face him, look beyond him to Jack Hayes. "King of Hell," I say scornfully. "Is that King Jack, or King Hayes?"

"Hades," he says. It is a while before I realize that he is correcting my pronunciation.

"Where is Carolyn?" I ask.

"My wife is safe."

"Where is Carolyn?" I ask again.

"She is not Carolyn," Hayes says. "Her name is Kore. Some call her Persephone."

"I don't have time—"

"I will tell you where she is," he says. "I first saw her many years ago. She was gathering flowers, and she had wandered too far from her companions. I fell in love with her then—I saw that she would bring light to my dark lands. I rode my chariot up from Hell, and I seized her and bore her down to my kingdom. Her mother Demeter searched all the earth for her but could not find her, and in her sorrow called down the chilling winter. It was Hermes who led Demeter to her daughter, that first winter so long ago."

"Hermes?"

Mickey bows toward me mockingly. "The Romans called me Mercury. The messenger, the quick-witted one, the god of commerce. And also—" he grins "—the trickster, the god of thieves."

I wonder if they are both crazy. But it doesn't really matter; the important thing is making sure that Carolyn is safe. "Where is she?"

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"You *are* persistent," Mickey says. "She chose well for a change, Demeter did."

"What do you mean?"

"Demeter searches every year for her daughter. She will not end her winter until Kore is found, and we made the search more difficult than usual this year." Mickey shakes his head, almost in admiration. "This is the first time she's hired a private investigator, though. I made sure that the one she found was incompetent, but apparently she tried again without my help."

"Why didn't you just tell her where her daughter is?"

"Some years I do, some years I don't. You can't trust me, really." He grins engagingly. "You know the Little Ice Age, during the Middle Ages? That was my doing. And now—she should have gone to you sooner. She's left it far too late."

"Where—"

Jack Hayes raises his hand to stop me, then waves to a corner of the room still in shadow. Carolyn comes toward us. She is very pale; even her blue eyes seem paler, and there are dark circles under her eyes. Her long white dress is torn and dirty.

Suddenly I remember the rest of the Greek legend. "You've had your time with her," I say to Hayes. "She ate four pomegranate seeds—that gave you four months with her. It's spring now—it's time for her to go home."

Hayes nods. The foul light slowly diminishes. Before he can change his mind I grab Carolyn by the wrist and hurry toward the door.

Mickey is standing there, blocking the way. I didn't even see him move; I would have sworn that he was still behind me. "No," he says. He's still smiling; it's all a game to him. "Let's have another Ice Age. The last one was such fun."

I let go of Carolyn and turn to look at Hayes. It's a mistake; Mickey shoves me toward the throne and tries to force me to the floor.

I sidestep him, sliding to one side and crouching down. He is still lunging forward, and as he moves in front of me I punch him in the kidney.

He doubles over. Before he can get up I run for the door, taking Carolyn with me. The door opens easily.

We step outside. It's raining hard; we are drenched within seconds. I slam the door behind me and run down the street, taking Carolyn with me. As we reach the corner a taxi comes toward us. I hail it and we get inside.

I give the driver Dora Green's address and sit back. Carolyn stares through the wiper blades at the streets outside. There is a trace of sadness on her face, and—what seems worse to me—resignation. What does

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she think, having been delivered from the terrors of that warehouse? Has it happened before, as Mickey said? For how many years has she had to take this ride home?

A few minutes later we drive up to Ms. Green's house. I pay the driver and we walk up to the front door. I ring the bell.

The door opens. Dora Green steps outside and sees her daughter. She goes toward Carolyn and holds her close; they stand motionless for a long time. I cannot read the expression on her face.

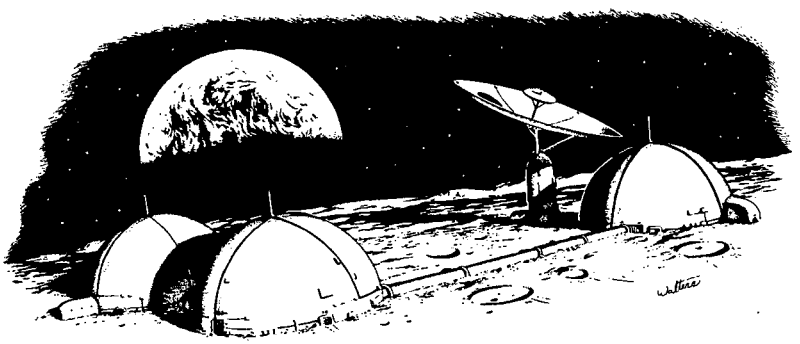
The rain stops. A warm wind courses from somewhere, heavy with the scents of flowers and oranges. Tiny green leaves are budded on the branches of the trees; I hadn't noticed them before. They open as I watch.

After a long moment Dora releases her daughter and turns the full regard of her gaze to me. The air burns around her, bright as gold. She seems to read my entire life in an instant, both my past and what is to come. Her expression is perfectly balanced between joy and sorrow.

I want to fall to my knees before her. The goddess of earth, of fertility. "I thank you," Demeter says.

I am taking a leave of absence from my job, at least until the child is born and is old enough for daycare. Demeter has been more than generous in settling up her bill, and Hermes, the god of commerce, seems to have shrugged off the incident in the warehouse and has offered me a loan. He is also, as he was good enough to warn me, the god of thieves, but I've dealt with crooks before. I am very glad not to have to take money from my parents.

The doctor tells me the child will be a girl. I am going to call her Demetra. ●



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WHAT CAN CHLOË WANT?

Brian Stableford

Brian Stableford's next novel, *The Carnival of Destruction* (the conclusion of the trilogy that includes *The Werewolves of London* and *The Angel of Pain)* is due out in April 1994 from Simon and Schuster (UK) and Carrol & Graf (US). Mr. Stableford is currently at work on the first volume of a new trilogy, *Serpent's Blood,* which should be published by Legend (UK) in the spring of 1995. It will be followed by *Salamander's Fire* and *Chimera's Cradle.* He tells us that "unlike the last three, which were science fiction disguised as horror, these are science fiction disguised as fantasy."

art: Steve Cavallo

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While her parents argued in their usual niggling fashion, Chloë watched the piglets sucking at the sow's teats. She didn't quite understand what the argument was about. She rarely did. Mostly she tried to shut out the sound, by concentrating hard on something else. For the moment, there was only the sow and its piglets, and so she concentrated on those. The pigs and piglets she had seen in her picture-books were pink, but these weren't; their skin was much the same color as Daddy's: a very pale brown.

The sow was huge. If it had been able to stand on its hind legs it would have been two feet taller than Daddy, who was not a small man, but it couldn't stand on its hind legs. In fact, it couldn't stand at all. It was too fat. It had to be fed through a tube.

What must it be like, Chloë wondered, to have to lie down all the time, having food pumped into you? It must be like being a baby all over again. Although it was feeding its own babies now, the sow's life had come full circle; it had started out as a tiny helpless bundle of flesh, and had ended up as a giant helpless bundle of flesh.

Someday, Chloë knew, the sow would just be meat: bacon, ham, and sausages. Even the eyes and the bones could be ground up to make sausages, or so one of the boys at school had told her. He might have been lying. Anyhow, some of that huge mass of flesh would become human flesh by being eaten. Some of it might even become her *own* flesh. It was an intriguing, if slightly unpleasant, thought.

The argument faded away, for the moment. Mummy was tight-lipped and silent. Daddy had turned away to talk to the red-faced man who had brought them into the shed. "Can you bring it out?" he asked. "I'd like her to touch it—to hold it—if that's okay."

"Sure," said the red-faced man. "Why not?" He climbed over the bars and went to pick up one of the piglets. It squealed when he took it away from the teat. He brought it back, and knelt down so that Chloë could reach out to it.

Chloë wasn't sure that she wanted to touch the piglet, but Daddy obviously wanted her to. She ran a tentative finger along its side and twitched its ear. It was warm, and its skin was soft and smooth. The sensation was nicer than she had anticipated.

"She doesn't *want* to, Mike," her mother said. "You can *see* that."

"She's just nervous," Daddy said, taking the piglet from the man and cradling it in his big hands. "Go on darling, it's okay. Stroke her."

Chloë stroked the piglet. She was a good girl. She always did what she was told.

"This isn't *necessary*," Mummy said. "It really isn't."

"She ought to have the opportunity to understand," her father replied, stubbornly.

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"*Understand!* She's seven years old, Mike! How can she even *begin* to understand?"

"She won't always be seven. Do you want to hold her, Lovely? Go on—take her."

Chloë's hands weren't big enough to cradle the piglet the way her father had. She had to clutch the tiny creature in her arms, as though it were one of her dolls—except that it resisted her, and she had to clutch it tightly to stop it wriggling out of her grasp. She tried to hug it, the way Mummy hugged her, but the piglet didn't want to be hugged. The piglet wanted to get back to its mother's teat.

"Be careful of her coat, Mike," Mummy complained. "She'll get dirty. Please take it away—they're neither of them enjoying it."

Chloë was wearing her sky-blue raincoat with the belt. She'd got it dirty before, and Mummy hadn't seemed to mind overmuch. Even so, when the red-faced man reached out to take the piglet back, Chloë wasn't sorry to be rid of it.

"That's the piglet that's going to save your life," her father said, as she released it. "The one you just held in your hands."

"Mike!" wailed Mummy, in her most exasperated voice. "Do you *have* to?"

"Yes," said Daddy, firmly. "It's important. She ought to understand what's happening, as best she can." But he didn't try to explain it to her—not then.

The next time Chloë's father brought her to visit the piglet, Mummy stayed at home. That was better, because it meant that Daddy wasn't always talking over her head; except for what he said to the men in white coats, everything he said was meant for her. She preferred that.

The piglet was no longer in the pen with the sow. It had its own pen now, not in the shed any more, but in the big house, in a place where there were all kinds of machines and everything was clean. The piglet was running back and forth now, and taking notice of things, and it didn't squeal at all. When Chloë and her father knelt down outside the pen, it came toward them, looking at them from its pretty dark eyes. Chloë wondered if it recognized her.

"Is it safe to reach through?" Daddy asked the man in the white coat, and when the man in the white coat said that it was, Daddy took her little hand in his and put it between the bars. The piglet didn't mind being stroked this time, and Chloë didn't mind stroking it.

"They're looking after her very carefully," Daddy said, "because she's a very special piglet. All the piglets in here are special. They all have human hearts."

"Why?" Chloë asked—not because she particularly wanted to know,

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but because Daddy was wearing an expression which told her that he expected to be asked.

"They're growing hearts for people whose hearts don't work very well. Your heart doesn't work very well—that's why you're ill so often, and not as strong as other children at school. You need a new heart, but hearts aren't easy to come by. Sometimes, the doctors can take a heart out of a little boy or girl who's been killed in an accident, but not all hearts are alike. Sometimes, when a boy or a girl gets someone else's heart, their body reacts against it. They can take medicine which stops the reaction, but that makes the body much more vulnerable to all sorts of illnesses. The best replacement heart for someone like you is a heart made by your own genes—genes are the things inside you which make you *you* and not somebody else—and the only way to make one of those is to put some of your genes into a baby pig, long before it's born. Then the pig grows a heart exactly like *your* heart, only healthy. This is the piglet that has your heart, Chloë."

Chloë took her hand away, and looked at the piglet which had her heart. The piglet looked back. She knew that Daddy wanted her to ask another question, so that he could tell her more, but she didn't know what to ask. This was the piglet that had her heart. What more was there to say? But there *was* more, and Daddy obviously wanted to make certain that she heard it all.

"The piglet has to take medicine to make it grow very quickly," Daddy said, patiently. "All piglets take that sort of medicine anyway, because farmers want them to grow as quickly as possible so as to produce more meat, but *your* piglet has to take extra-special medicine, because it has your heart, and it has to be a strong heart. In not much more than a year the piglet has to grow a heart as big and strong as the hearts which boys and girls take eight or nine years to grow. It's clever of the scientists to be able to do that—though not as clever as being able to make a pig with a human heart."

"When will they do the operation?" Chloë asked. She hoped it would be a long time in the future. She didn't like being in the hospital.

"Next year," Daddy told her. Chloë was relieved. Next year was a long way away.

"Will they put *my* heart into the piglet?" Chloë asked. She knew that the answer was no, but she asked anyway, anxious to reassure her father that she was taking an interest. He liked her to ask questions, even dumb ones—*especially* dumb ones, it sometimes seemed.

Daddy put a protective arm around her shoulder. "That wouldn't be any use, Lovely," he said. "They have to let the piglet die. But that's what happens to pigs anyway; they're killed for their meat as soon as they're big enough. I want you to understand that, Chloë."

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She did understand. Pigs were meat or providers of human hearts; one way or another, some of their flesh became human flesh. What she didn't understand was why Mummy got so tight-lipped about Daddy bringing her to see the piglet which had her heart—or, for that matter, everything else she got tight-lipped about. There was no point asking; it was the sort of question which simply wasn't dumb enough to get an answer.

Chloë told her best friend Alice about visiting the piglet which had her heart, and within a matter of hours it was all around the school. At recess, some of the children chanted, "Chloë has a pig's heart! Chloë has a pig's heart!" It wasn't that they didn't understand which way round things were, it was just that they didn't care enough about accuracy to let it spoil a good chant. A teacher who heard them got annoyed, the way teachers always did when the other children were nasty to Chloë, and reported the matter to her mother, who blamed it on her father.

"The next thing you know," Mummy complained, "we'll have animal rights nuts slashing the car tires."

"I want her to understand," her father said, obstinately. "I want her to know what's happened to her. This won't be the last time she has to face that kind of stupid knee-jerk reaction. I want her to be able to confront other people's superstitious fears and idiotic jokes without getting upset. I want her to be secure in her own mind."

"I know all about what *you* want," Mummy retorted. "What does *Chloë* want? That's what I care about."

The one thing Chloë wanted, at that particular moment, was not to be asked what she wanted. She hated it when one or the other of her parents asked her what she wanted when she knew one of them wanted her to say one thing and the other one wanted her to say something else. She hated to be forced into picking one of them and disappointing the other. Mostly, she kept quiet, even if that meant they got mad at her instead.

"She's an intelligent girl," Daddy said. "She's capable of taking it all aboard. She needs to know what's going on."

"She doesn't *need* to visit the damn piglet once a fortnight! She doesn't *need* to be dragged along and forced to look it in the eye! She doesn't have to be taken on tours of factory farms and abattoirs to understand where her dinner comes from, so why does she have to be taken to that horrible lab to watch the damn piglet doing its exercises?"

The damn piglet really did do exercises. Daddy had explained to her that it wasn't like the sows out in the shed, that would have heart attacks if they over-exerted themselves. *Her* piglet had to keep fit. *Her* piglet had to be in tip-top condition, because it had *her* heart, and had to look after it for her, to make sure it was a strong and healthy heart when they transplanted it.

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"She's interested," Daddy insisted. "Aren't you, darling? You like going to see the piglet, don't you?"

"Like hell she does," said Mummy. "You'd rather stay home, wouldn't you? You'd far rather play with your Nintendo, wouldn't you?"

Chloë didn't answer. She concentrated hard on the TV screen, which was displaying a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Tom had just been squashed flat by a steamroller and was struggling to regain his shape.

"You see, Lovely," Daddy said, putting his hand on her shoulder and trying to turn her away from the TV, "you're part of something very important. A lot of people are like those silly kids at school—they let their gut-reactions get the better of them, and they think there's something *creepy* about transgenic animals. You're going to be a kind of walking advertisement for the scientists who are saving your life, and it's important that you know what's at stake."

"What the hell are you telling her *that* for?" her mother demanded. "You think she doesn't feel bad enough having a bad heart without having to be a walking ad for the wonders of modern science? She's a *seven-year-old* girl for Christ's sake. *You* can talk to all the effing reporters when the time comes! *She* doesn't have to do it."

"It's better if she doesn't have to be hidden away," Daddy said. "It's better if she can speak for herself. If she understands what's going on, she'll be able to cope with all the questions, and the prejudices of idiots won't upset her."

It wasn't easy to figure out who won the argument, but at least they didn't force her to take sides. By the time they all had to sit down to eat dinner, the row had dwindled away into a frosty silence. Chloë didn't mind frosty silences; they were generally less taxing than polite conversations. The next day, though, Daddy took her to see the piglet yet again, while Mummy fretted and fumed at home.

The last time Chloë saw the pig that had her heart, it certainly wasn't a damn piglet any more. It was bigger and heavier than she was, although that was partly because she was even thinner than usual just then. She hadn't been well, and had missed a whole week of school. Christmas had come and gone, and "next year" had become "this year," which wasn't a distant prospect at all.

The pig that had her heart was lean and lively; it didn't look at all like the chubby pigs in her picture-books. Its hide was far rougher now, and its once-soft ears were now so bristly that Chloë had begun to understand why people sometimes said that you couldn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. The pig looked as if it ought to have been out-of-doors, rooting around in a field, but it was still kept indoors, and not in the shed, either. It had a run in a windowless basement lit by harsh

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striplights, where everything was just as clean as it had been in the old lab.

Chloë wasn't allowed to touch the pig this time; she just stood at one end of the run and watched it from behind the bars. It galloped up to see her, and she could tell that it really *did* recognize her. It knew that it had seen her before, that she had visited it regularly since it was very tiny. It *didn't* know, of course, that it had her heart, but it knew that there was *something* between the two of them, that they weren't just strangers.

"You don't have to worry about her, Chloë," the man in the white coat said to her, gently. "She won't feel a thing. She'll just go to sleep and never wake up. She's had a better life than most living creatures—better than most people. You mustn't be sad for her."

If I'm made of all the things I've eaten, Chloë thought, as she looked at the mashed cereals and mixed vegetables that were just then being poured into the pig's trough, *then even the bits of me that aren't made directly from vegetables are made from second-hand vegetables. But what are vegetables made of? Soil and water? I'm mud, really, and my heart's mud too. All mud, eaten once or eaten twice.*

"It won't do any harm for her to be a little bit sentimental," Daddy said to the scientist. "It's only right that she should know what'll happen—that her life will only be saved by virtue of the sacrifice of another living creature. Her mother wants to hide it all from her, but I want her to understand, and that's what Chloë wants too. Every seven-year-old wants to understand everything. I did. I still do."

"I don't want to go into the hospital," Chloë said, although she knew full well that it wouldn't do any good.

"I know you don't, Beauty," Daddy said. "Nobody ever does. But the doctors have to make you better. The doctors have to put your new heart inside your body, before the old one gives up altogether. We all want you to get better, don't we?"

The pig was already tucking into the food that had been put into its trough. It ate greedily, just like a pig was supposed to. Chloë was glad to see it had a good appetite. After all, it was her heart that was filling the pig with such energy, such enthusiasm. When she got her new heart, that would become *her* energy, *her* enthusiasm.

"I want to play football," she said, contemplatively, "for Queen's Park Rangers."

Daddy and the scientist laughed. "That's what comes of moving down south for the sake of work," her father said.

"It could be worse," the man in the white coat observed. "She might want to play for Millwall."

* * *

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After the operation, she was in the hospital for weeks on end. She missed a whole half-term of school, which was good. She knew that when she went back the other kids would be ready and waiting, avid to chant: "Chloë has a pig's heart! Chloë has a pig's heart!" now that it was *true*. Except, of course, that it wasn't really true. She had her *own* heart, lovingly designed by her own genes, without the flaw that had spoiled the one she had been born with.

"Soon," Mummy told her, as the day of her release finally approached. "You'll be able to go anywhere you like. You'll be able to run fast, and climb, and do anything you want."

"Except play for Queen's Park Rangers," Daddy put in, because he liked private jokes.

"This is a new beginning," Mummy said, making a big show out of ignoring him. "This is the *real* beginning of your whole life."

"And you owe it all to science," Daddy said, "and to the other Chloë."

"I do wish you'd forget all that, Mike," Mummy said, petulantly. "And I do wish you wouldn't keep calling the damn pig *the other Chloë*. What are you trying to do, give the poor kid a complex?"

"It's *you* who's trying to give her a complex!" Daddy retorted. Chloë hoped that they weren't going to ask her to decide which one of them was giving her a complex, because she really didn't know.

"She's just a little girl, Mike," Mummy said. "I'm her *mother*, for Christ's sake!"

"She's not *just* a little girl," Daddy insisted. "She's *our* little girl—not to mention a miracle of modern science, and a heroine of the genetic revolution."

"I don't *want* her to be a scientific miracle and a heroine of the genetic revolution!" Mummy said. "I want her to be a little girl like any other little girl, who doesn't get made fun of by her schoolmates, and who doesn't get doorstepped by tabloid journalists, and who doesn't have to have her head full of morbid fantasies about *pigs*."

"You can't always get what you want," Daddy pointed out, "and there's no way we can armor her against the curiosity of the world—but we *can* make sure that she doesn't have any morbid fantasies, and the way we can do *that* is to make sure she understands exactly what's happened to her, and how, and why."

"The nurse said she had a nightmare only the other day," Mummy reported, resentfully.

"*All* kids have nightmares," Daddy said, flatly. "*Did* you have a nightmare, darling? What was it about?"

"I don't remember," Chloë said, truthfully, fearing that the truth might not suffice.

"It's okay, Lovely," Mummy said, putting a reassuring arm around her

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shoulder. "You'll be home soon, and everything will be all right, won't it?"

"Yes, it will," said Daddy. "*Everything.*"

Later, when they had gone off in the car—not fighting exactly, but not really speaking to one another either—Chloë thought about the pig. She knew that Daddy wanted her to think about the pig and Mummy didn't, but she didn't feel that she was taking sides because she couldn't *not think* about the pig without thinking about it. Anyway, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to the rest of the pig now that they'd taken out her heart.

Presumably, it would all be bacon and sausages by now, and if they'd left a little bit of her behind when they'd cut out the heart, that would be sausages too—and through being sausages, might eventually end up being a little bit of someone else's heart. There probably wasn't anyone in London, except vegetarians and girls who wore headscarves and weren't allowed to show their knees, who couldn't look at a pig—any pig—and think: *there might be a little bit of me in that pig.*

What would happen, she wondered, if one of the girls in the headscarves who weren't allowed to eat any kind of pig-meat got born with a bad heart? They'd probably have to grow her heart inside a lamb—which was a pity, in a way, given that lambs were so cute. Pigs were more human: smarter, less woolly, not in nursery rhymes.

Chloë was a little pig, she thought. *It had a human heart.* But when she ran through the readily available rhymes for "heart" it seemed better not to carry on.

Do I really want to be a miracle of modern science? she wondered, and then answered *Why the hell not, for Christ's sake?* She liked swearing, although she never did it aloud. She was a good girl, even if she did have a pig's heart.

She wondered if Mummy and Daddy were going to get divorced, and, if so, who would get custody of her. She decided, eventually, that she didn't really mind, as long as they didn't make her *decide.*

Afterward, she threw her doll out of the bed, because she was too old for dolls now that she had a new heart. Then she decided that it might be better to play for Millwall than Queen's Park Rangers, if it would make men in white coats sit up and take notice. Then she thought about the pig again: the *other* Chloë; the creature who had died for her sake, like some kind of hero in a TV show; the animal who had grown up far too quickly so that it could make her a new heart.

When I grow up, she thought, before she went to sleep, *I'm going to be a genetic engineer. I'll keep headless chickens and grow potatoes the size of bungalows, and I'll have trees that grow hearts and brains instead of apples and pears, and I'll make my husband have the children and I'll never never never ask them what they want, unless I want to know.* ●

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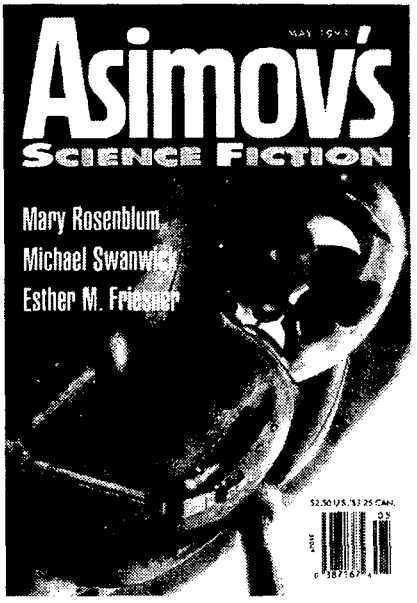

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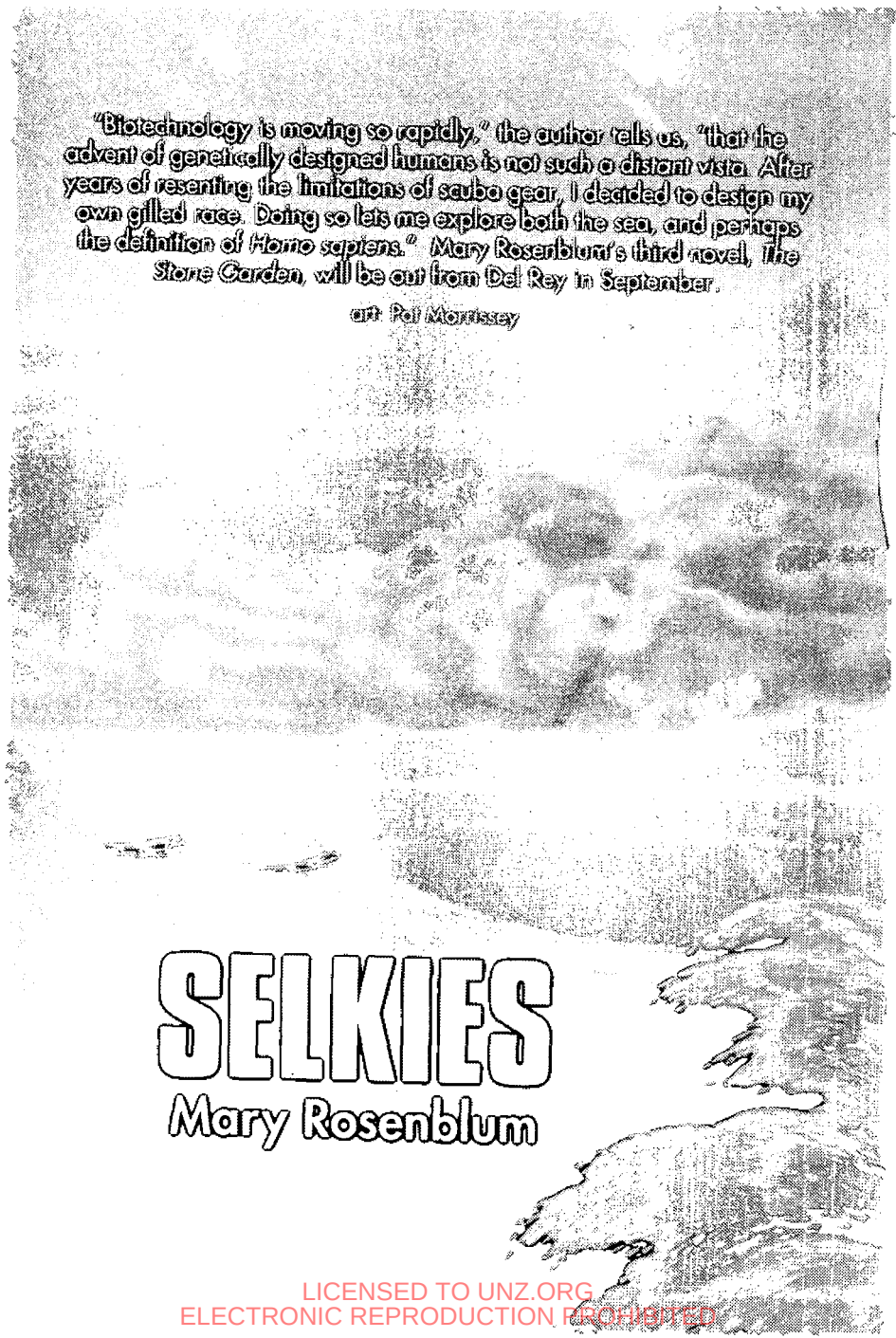

SELKIES

Mary Rosenblum

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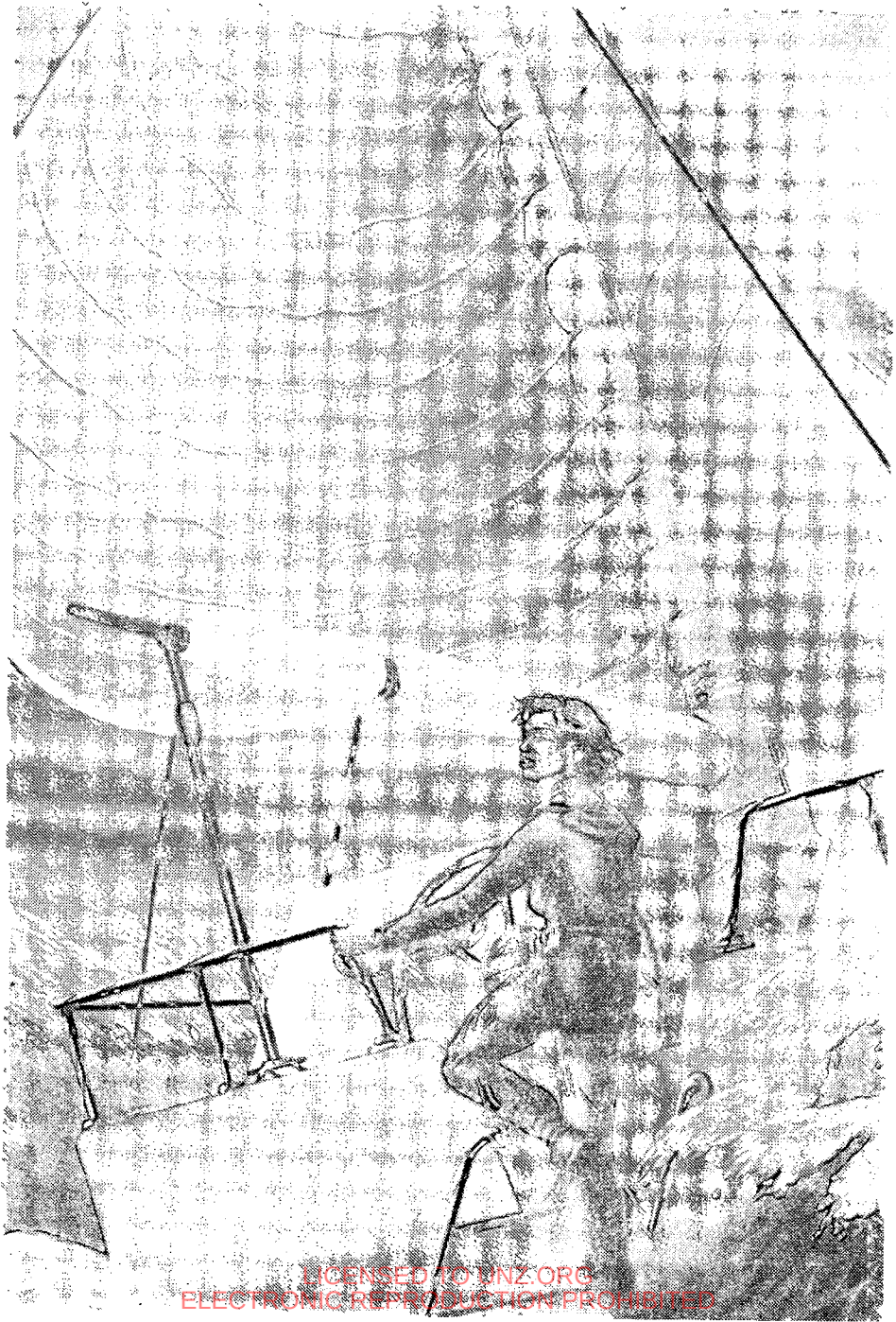

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"Lights!" Jessamin covered her throat-patch to block out the wind-noise. Yellow light flooded the deck, and she clung to the satellite antenna as a wave crashed across the twin-hulled boat. A welter of foam surged across the deck, dirty white in the floodlights' glare. She should have checked the sat-link for storms, this afternoon. She had been careless. The wind screamed, plastering her wet bangs to her face, flapping loose folds of her storm suit. Another wave slammed into the boat, skidding the VTOL closer to the edge of the deck. Jessamin grabbed for the loose guy line as the wind whipped it past her. The little jet should have been tied down properly in the first place. Her mistake. She let go of the antenna mount. You were responsible for your mistakes, even if you were Jessamin Chen, head of Tanaka-Pacific's Aquaculture division.

Got it! The cable stung her palms as she clutched it, and she bared her teeth to the stinging blast of wind-driven spray. You can't sink me, you can't drown me. Go ahead and try—a lot of people have tried to sink me over the last three decades, and they couldn't do it.

Of course, she was cheating. Jessamin touched her storm harness and laughed. The line tethering her wasn't going to break, and you couldn't sink this boat if you tried. No unnecessary risks—not if you want to get to the top and stay there.

The bow rode up a towering swell, foam streaming down its cambered sides. With a crash, it dropped into the deep trough beyond. Water boiled across the deck, and the VTOL slid again. Damn. She stretched for the tie-down ring, couldn't reach it. Carla would find out, if Jessamin ordered a new VTOL. She'd spend the time and money to discover *why*. It would be another point scored, a small private victory—that Jessamin had been careless.

You think I don't know how closely you watch me? Jessamin searched for a handy cleat. That's all right. I watch *you*, too. It's not time yet, daughter. Jessamin threw her head back, letting the wind rake the wet hair from her face. "You get the Aquaculture Division when *I* decide you're ready," she yelled into the storm. "*If* I decide you're ready." She whipped the VTOL's cable around a deck cleat, and hauled it tight. No, Carla was good, but not good enough. Not yet. Time to study patience, daughter. Jessamin headed forward to secure the rest of the VTOL's tiedowns, bent against the slashing rain. And don't sic your lover on me in public.

Paul had been so *transparent* in Zurich, trying to undercut her during their negotiations with the World Resource Council. Trying to make her look incompetent. *Her*. That bumbling puppy. Did he really think that Carla could save him if he seriously challenged her? Jessamin could swat him like a fly.

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Well, maybe. Jessamin grimaced and hung onto the craft's forward tie-down as the next wave surged across the deck. She'd had her hands full with the Council, never mind Paul. They weren't going to rubber-stamp the renewal of Tanaka's monopoly contract on the Pacific fishery this time around. The East European Coalition had thrown a serious challenge in their way, and the East block had a lot of votes on the Council. If Tanaka lost the Pacific Fishery, the Coalition would rape it. She yanked the cable tight, secured it.

Light turned the oncoming swells to mountains of green glass, capped with wind-shredded foam. Gray curtains of rain swept across the bow as the boat ploughed through the next swell. There was so much *life* down there. Food for humanity forever. If humanity didn't get too greedy.

The Coalition was greedy.

Jessamin licked her lips, tasting salt from the windblown spume, cold inside her storm suit. A few years ago, she could have brought the Council to heel in one session. *Maybe you* are *getting old.* Carla's voice in the wind?

No, daughter. Not yet. Jessamin squinted aft, checking the deck for anything else that might be coming loose in the storm. All secure. Go below, make yourself a toddy, and go to bed. As she started to head back to the companionway, a dark shape caught her eye out in the floodlit chaos. Driftwood? She leaned on the rail, metal cold beneath her bare palms. A dead seal? The dark shape slid down the side of a swell, and pale skin gleamed through ragged curtains of rain. Jessamin's stomach contracted. A body? Out here, so far from shore? Some fool of a sports fisherman who hadn't checked the sat-link for weather before he went out? Too late for him. He'd paid for his stupidity. He belonged to the sea, now.

Her hands were freezing and water had leaked in around her suit's hood, cold on her neck. Jessamin started to turn away. For an instant, the rain thinned. Light snagged a flicker of motion, dragged it into her peripheral vision; shoulders bunching, an arm lifting from white foam. Jessamin grabbed the rail, squinting down as the rain closed in once again. Yes, *movement.*

He was alive.

The boat slid up the next swell, and the weakly struggling swimmer slid aft, bumping against the hull now, sucked along toward the big intake port. "Engines, stop!" she yelled. "Bow thrusters only. Maintain stern into the wind." She ran aft, wind shoving her as the boat slowed and maneuvered. Her safety line snagged. She yanked at it, nearly fell over backward as it came suddenly loose. Where was he? Gone under? She grabbed the mounted buoy-launcher, swiveled it around, scanning the rainswept swells. There! He floundered to the surface, arms moving

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weakly. He wasn't trying for the boat, didn't even seem to be aware that it was there. If he was that far gone, he might not come back up next time. Bitter irony, to fight so hard and die so close to rescue. She respected a fighter.

Jessamin sighted just short of him, fired. The life-buoy launched, trailing its line, splashed down less than a meter from him. Bright orange nets popped out from the basketball sized buoy, forming a floating skirt. The swimmer grabbed, hooked a pale arm through the mesh. Jessamin staggered as a wave slammed into the boat. Swearing, she braced herself against the rail. Come on, man. Her arms ached with strain. *Help me!*

He tried. A wave lifted him as he got closer, and he grabbed for the diving deck, beaching like a stranded orca as the wave broke across the waterline platform. Dark hair in a strange cut came to a point down between his shoulderblades. Like fur, one corner of her mind noticed. "Can you climb the ladder?" she yelled down. Not likely, and she couldn't open the deck-level hatch in this storm. Shit. The boat groaned as the next swell slammed it. The diving deck dipped into the green wall of water and the exhausted swimmer vanished.

Jessamin swung out onto the ladder, shaking her safety line loose from snags. Tie him to the ladder and worry about getting him up here later. Her foot slipped, and she gasped, hands coming loose from the rung. She fell a breathless meter, landed *whump* on the slippery deck as the next wave surged over it. Eyes squeezed shut, she grabbed for the ladder. Her feet lifted and she felt Patrick's touch in the water, like cold fingers stroking her skin. He was down there. Somewhere. *I'll see you,* he'd said on that last morning, kissing her so gently before he went down to the beach for his morning swim. *I'll see you.* As if he'd meant to come back.

He hadn't. It had been suicide, and it was *water* she felt, not ghostly fingers. The surge receded, and she got her feet under her. Sucking in a quick breath, Jessamin grabbed for the swimmer. Her hand closed on his shoulder, fingers digging into his armpit. Cold flesh, cold as Patrick's. Major hypothermia? "Can you hold onto the ladder?"

Amazingly, he struggled to his feet. Yes, this guy was a fighter. Another wave coming . . . Jessamin shoved him against the ladder. "Hang on!" Jessamin leaned against his corpse-cold body, struggling to loop her safety line around him. To her surprise, he started climbing, pulling himself upward one rung at a time. She shoved him higher, her hands sliding on naked flesh, snagging in a pair of swim trunks. What had this idiot been doing? Taking a quick dip in the storm? He faltered at the top, and she shoved him roughly onboard, scrambling after him, safe. "Main engines *on*." She clamped a hand over her throat patch. "Storm speed, hull down."

Jessamin staggered as the nav system kicked in the big props. The

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boat shied like a startled horse, and she fell hard to her knees beside the sprawled swimmer, shivering now, teeth chattering with cold and the aftermath of adrenaline. The man had curled fetal-wise on the wet deck, not shivering, which was a bad sign. Jessamin grabbed his shoulder and recoiled as he flinched away. *She,* not he, and young. She stared as the girl struggled to sit up. Light from the deck floods gleamed on small breasts set way too far apart, and highlighted the obscene bulge of flesh between them. That bulge ran like a wide flacid tube from collarbone to hips, each end puckered into a purplish slash, like a badly healed surgical scar.

A gill tunnel. In the water, those puckered mouths would open, letting water flow through the delicate folded membranes that allowed this girl to breathe beneath the sea. Jessamin swallowed. Patrick had called them *selkies,* after some sea-dwellers of his childhood fairytales. She had refused to make it Tanaka's official name for them, had told him that Aquatic Specialist was better, more scientific, more acceptable. They'd fought about it one night, and he had stomped out in a rage. Later, he had brought her a dirt-grown white rose as a peace offering, and they had made love in front of the fireplace. The heat from the fire had washed his fair skin with ruddy light. . . .

Jessamin shook her head, dizzy in this wave-rush of unexpected memory. In the end, names had made no difference at all. Ah, Patrick. You cared too much, and in the end it killed you.

"Are you . . . finished staring?" The girl gave Jessamin a glazed scowl and tried to get to her feet.

"Just take it easy." Teeth chattering, wet beneath her storm suit, Jessamin reached for the girl's arm, staggered with her weight. "Are you hurt?"

"No." The girl leaned on Jessamin, heavier than she looked. "Just hungry, I think. We get like this. . . . "

Yes, they did. Because it took energy to keep a mammal warm in the cold sea, never mind how much body fat you coat them with. And it took energy to make the uric acid that balanced salt and water in their body fluids so that they could live in their saline environment. The details came back to her, each one like the stab of a small knife. Patrick had worked them all out with her, crosslegged on their rumpled bed, awake until the early morning hours as he grappled with the traits he needed to create *Homo aquaticus.* It wasn't his voice that had kept her from sleep. It had been his face that had held her—transformed with vision, eyes glowing in the soft light of her bedside lamp.

A faulty vision. Patrick was long dead, and she was cold. "Come on." Jessamin started for the main companionway, staggering with the wave motion and the added burden of the girl's weight. Vaguely, she noticed

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that the storm was finally easing. The girl was unsteady, but at least she was walking. The wind snatched the door from her hands and slammed it back on its hinges. With a grunt, Jessamin wrestled it closed. The sudden quiet made her ears ring. The girl broke away from her with a wrench and collapsed into the nearest chair.

It was always a shock to go from the raw reality of sea and sky to the warmth of wood, woven fabrics, and soft light. An intentional contrast. Jessamin grimaced at the water spotting the wooden floor and a corner of the carpet. The girl's presence made the room seem crowded, in spite of its spacious dimensions. She rarely invited anyone out to the boat. This was her refuge. Her space. "So, what are you doing out here?" Jessamin stepped back into the tiled entry, stripped out of her storm suit, and hung it on its hook. "You came from Briard?"

Jessamin glanced at her terminal desk. She hadn't programmed a course to Briard, had simply set a random-select autopilot to keep her moving and secure from anyone who might want to know where one of the most powerful women on the planet hid her vulnerable flesh.

They *were* close to Briard Research Station. Not *very* close, but within a possible swimming distance. Jessamin shivered. Coincidence. Of course she passed near Briard occasionally as she roved up and down the Pacific coast. Once upon a time, she had spent a lot of time there. When it had been Patrick's home and lab. Enough ghosts already. "We're a long swim from the Station."

"Are we?" The girl's eyes flashed at Jessamin's sharp tone. "I don't know." She hunched in the chair, arms crossed protectively over her chest.

"You *should* know. You swam it." Jessamin walked past her, pissed at her ungrateful attitude. "What's your name? And how did you get permission to leave the station, anyway?" It had been closed to any access for years now, walled off by court injunctions against trespass. She stopped in front of her kitchen-wall, touched up the inventory on the little flatscreen. This kid was AWOL, and it was Carla's responsibility. She ran Research. If she really planned to inherit all of Aquaculture, she'd damn well better know that one of Tanaka's expensive and dangerous genens was missing. Scowling, she touched in her choice.

"Who are you anyway?" The girl twisted around to face her, feet tucked up onto the chair. Pale folds of webbing stuck up between her long toes. "How do you know about Briard, anyway? You've got to work for Tanaka."

That surly tone wasn't anger. Jessamin gave her a quick sideways glance, and scooped up the drink packets that had dropped into the receiver tray. The kid was scared. "I'm Jess. I've worked for Tanaka." The

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past-tense came so automatically. Why? Automatic caution? Jessamin stabbed a straw into one of the plastic packets. "Drink all of these."

"What is it?" She took the packets warily, fingers spreading to reveal the translucent folds of webbing that joined them.

"A juice-protein drink. High fat, lots of calories." She kept it for after dives, hated it. "Strawberry. And you haven't told me your name."

"Shira." The girl took a swallow, grimaced. "Yuck. I'm Shira Doyle." She lifted her chin, her eyes dark and defiant.

Doyle.

Jessamin leaned against the kitchen-wall, needing all her skill to hide her expression. *I want a child, Jess,* Patrick had said so many years ago. And she had laughed, because she had just been named head of Aquaculture, and the world was hers, waiting for her to carve her name on it. And later, when there had been time and reason, it had been too late.

Patrick had begun with undifferentiated human gametes, had added and subtracted DNA segments as he sculpted them into his selkies. The original DNA had come from anonymous donors, selected for specific traits and filed by number. No names. No parentage issues. Transplanted into volunteer wombs, the engineered ova had grown, divided, had ultimately been born, the cutting edge of human genentech. Tanaka's new wonders. Children of genius Patrick, who had wanted to play God, even though Tanaka didn't really need a God. Costly mistakes. Jessamin closed her eyes briefly.

Patrick Doyle.

He'd used his *own* DNA to create this girl—oh yeah, you could see it in her face. That frown was his. *I want a child, Jess.* "I'm cold." Jessamin straightened, joints aching, feeling *old* suddenly. "Drink those. I'm going to put on some dry clothes." She took the small circular stairway down to her bedroom without waiting for an answer.

The twin hulls were transparent, molded from prestressed polyglass. She'd had her main-deck living area painted to keep out the space of sea and sky. For that, you had to go outside, take weather with your view. Down here, there was only sea. She stepped off the stairway without turning on the lights. It was never completely dark. A school of squid jetted by, ghostly streaks of green light. Constellations of living stars twirled in the dark water, and something large veered away from the hull, its sides spotted with bright yellow light. The storm must be easing off if her nav-system had slowed them down to slow cruise speed again. A pale oval appeared briefly on the far side of the thick glass, like a ghostly face pressed longingly against a window. She imagined Patrick peering in at her, face set into hard lines of reproach. "You're angry at me, aren't you?" Jessamin walked over to the hull, stopped just short of

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the smooth polyglass. "You wouldn't let me explain, you wouldn't *listen*." The luminescent shimmer of light seemed to coalesce into the girl's face, young and wary, looking at her with Patrick's eyes.

Jessamin clenched a fist, slammed it against the hull. The glowing blob of light skittered away, a fish or ray, nothing more. "Lights," she snapped, and blinked in the soft glow.

With the lights on, it became a bedroom with mirrored walls. No ghosts in here. Jessamin stripped quickly, tossing her damp clothes into a heap on the floor. Skinny, youthful body, dark hair, Chinese phenotype. She could pass for forty instead of sixty. A thick shirt and dry pants finally ended the shivering, and she sat down on the side of the big bed facing the entertainment-sized holo stage in the center of the room. "House, access Carla Chen." Carla would accept the access. She'd know all about Zurich by now. Jessamin stared at the empty stage, wondering which would come first; gloating over Jessamin's setback, or anger?

"Mother." Carla began to speak even before her image had fully focused onstage. "Paul just accessed me from Zurich. He said you didn't present your resignation at the meeting."

Anger. "Don't whine." Jessamin swallowed a surge of bitterness. She had chosen Carla's father from their stock of nameless donors, picked out a fine-boned, darkhaired Caucasian with the intelligence and creative quotients to complement her own genotype. Had this tendency to whine been embedded in there, too, between the genes for hazel eyes and the genes for a high IQ?

"I'm not whining." Carla flushed, the projector shading too heavily for red again, turning her face lobster-colored. "You said this was your last year. You were going to *retire*."

"I changed my mind." Jessamin shrugged. "If the Coalition gets the fishery, it'll take us a decade to get it back and a century to undo the damage. East Euro doesn't care if they strip the whole ocean bare, just so long as they pull out their maximum tonnage." She closed her eyes briefly, remembering the huge nets winched dripping from the sea, spewing flopping silvery life into the holds of the factory ships. So much wastage. Cleaning fish on the line, she had held the sea's raped guts in her numb, bloody hands, had listened to the oldtimers bitch about the reduced catch, and, deep inside, in a hidden place . . . she had wept. I was so *young*. Jessamin opened her eyes, gave her daughter a thin smile. So idealistic and immature. "I am going to see this crisis through," she said.

"*This* crisis?" Carla's face went carefully smooth. "There's always a crisis! Someone is *always* after something. Don't give me *crisis*, Mother. Tanaka won't fail if we lose the monopoly. This is just another excuse to leave me stuck with Research. You're *never* going to retire," she said softly. "The damn doctors will keep you alive forever, and you'll never

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believe that anyone but Jessamin Chen could do an adequate job of running Aquaculture."

"When I'm no longer the best choice for the job, I'll resign."

"Who's going to decide, Mother?" Carla's voice was cold. "*You?*"

"Yes." Jessamin met her daughter's eyes. "And what was your reason for putting Paul up against me? Do you really think he has the finesse to *do* anything? He might be good in bed, dear, but he's a klutz in negotiations. Keep him where he belongs." She waited for her daughter to flush and react, but Carla's smile never faltered.

"I'm sorry you don't get along," Carla said in a carefully regretful tone. "I'm sorry you feel that he's a threat to you."

"He's not good enough to be a *threat*." But Jessamin felt a twinge of unease. This was not the reaction she'd expected from her volatile daughter. Was Carla finally learning self-control? This entire conversation was being recorded by both herself and her daughter. What was going on here? "Are you missing any aquatics?" she asked sourly. "Or do you know?"

This time Carla *did* flush. "You never quit, do you?" Her voice quivered just a hair. "You'll never stop looking over my shoulder!"

Aha. "I want your side of it," Jessamin snapped. "Right now."

"Don't use that tone on *me*." But Carla looked away. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm thirty-five. The aquatic involved claimed it was an accident, as your informant undoubtedly told you." Her mouth twitched. "My God, we've had the pickets and the protesters out there forever! By now, they're practically part of the landscape. The staff and the aquatics have all had extensive counseling on dealing with that kind of thing. *I* don't know what happened. It's her word against a half dozen witnesses, but considering that the witnesses are all anti-genen fanatics, what does *that* mean?"

Good question. Jessamin pressed her lips together. "So where is she?"

"If I knew, I'm sure you would, too." Carla didn't try to hide the sarcasm in her tone. "If the man hadn't died, it wouldn't be such a big deal. I'm going to find out who's reporting to you, you know."

If the man hadn't died. A lifetime of control kept Jessamin's expression neutral. "Why didn't you *tell* me? My *God,* child. . . . "

"*I am not a child.*" Carla's shoulders hunched, as if she had clenched her fists out of sight beneath her desk. "Why *should* I have told you? *You* stuck me with Research—the most marginal operation in Tanaka. *You* told me not to bother you with details, that you wanted me to do it on my own. So that you could judge my performance, right? So, then, *judge.*" Her lips twisted. "I kept a lid on this, and it took work and money, let me tell you. I know what it could do to the Council vote on our Pacific contract if the media plays hackysack with that story. *Rogue Tanaka*

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Genen Kills Peaceful Protester. It won't happen," she said bitterly. "So you can skip the lecture. No cops. Tanaka security finds her, and we turn her over to the DA. They've got a court order to hold her until the World Court decides on the genens' legal status. The media's out of it. It's a done deal."

The girl upstairs, Shira, had killed a man. A prickle of ice touched Jessamin's neck, and she opened her mouth to tell Carla to get Briard security out here and fast.

She didn't say it. "All right. You've been handling it." She gave Carla a curt nod. "Keep me informed about this."

She snapped her fingers to break the connection, but not before Carla's look of wary surprise had registered. What? Jessamin made a face. Had Carla thought she was going to step in and take over? She probably *should*. Jessamin pressed her lips together. Kazi Itano had bowed to her, when she had taken Aquaculture from him so many many years ago. She wasn't ready to bow to Carla yet.

"You didn't tell her."

Jessamin turned slowly. Shira sat on the bottom step, raised knees hiding her gill tunnel, folded webbing sticking out from her clenched fists. "She was talking about me and you knew it. Why didn't you tell her I was here?"

She had Patrick's transparent face, and she was scared beneath that surly anger. Terrified. "I want to hear your side," Jessamin said slowly. Why *hadn't* she told Carla? Just because this kid wore Patrick's face? "I want to hear your side of it before they lock you up in some jail cell for the umpteen years that the Court will manage to evade this damn issue."

"Prison." Shira spread her long fingers, staring at the pale stretch of skin between them. "What would I do in prison?" She shuddered, and balled her hand into a fist again.

What indeed. *Aquatic,* Carla had said. They were Aquatic Specialists on Tanaka's inventory, listed like alvins or factory seiners. They had been *Homo aquaticus* to Patrick, a new race.

Selkies.

The girl stood up suddenly, crossed the room to sit on the edge of the bed. She moved awkwardly. Her too-long toes snagged on the carpet, and the webbing between them stuck up in thick folds. Her thick, heavily muscled legs were too long for her short, broad torso. She looked *wrong* in this lighted, ordinary space. Jessamin felt a twinge of revulsion. It was the kind of revulsion you might feel for someone with a terrible deformity. You overlaid and disguised it with civilized compassion, but underneath, you were revolted—a primitive, gut-level xenophobia. *Alien. Different. Not-tribe.*

The sea is most of our world, Patrick had said in bed one night. *But*

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we're aliens there, so we don't love it. We can't love it, and we need to love it, or we'll kill it. His eyes had shone in the dark room like a wild animal's, or a prophet's. He had *believed* in what he was doing, and she had funded him because of that faith, and not because he was her lover. It had still been a mistake.

That was why she hadn't told Carla. Because this was Patrick's daughter. It would have hurt Patrick, that his daughter was a killer.

Bad reason—as bad a reason as faith. Or love. It reeked of nostalgia, and, once, she had known nostalgia for the dangerous thing it was. Maybe she *was* getting old. Maybe she *should* step aside for Carla.

Who decides, Mother?

Me, and I'm not losing it yet. Jessamin sat down on the bed across from Shira, noticed the girl's small flinch. "Tell me about this man you killed."

"Why?" Shira looked past her at her reflection in the glass wall. "The media's got to be full of it, by now. Check it out there." Her voice trembled the tiniest bit. "Will you . . . turn out the light again, please?"

"Lights off." Sea-darkness filled the room, lighted by the bioluminescent galaxies orbiting slowly past. Shira fit in this scene. "The media's out of it. For now." Jessamin stared out into that dark, life-filled water. "The *why* is because Patrick Doyle was my friend."

Shira looked up. "Doyle? The guy who . . . made us? They say he was a genius. You knew him, huh?" She looked away. "He was a bastard! I hate his guts!"

"No!" The word came out too loud, too fast.

Shira's face tightened, but she didn't look at Jessamin.

She didn't know, Jessamin realized suddenly. The gene stocks were numbered, but not cross-referenced to donor names. Last names had been a whimsical thing. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen." Shira watched a school of small fish hover beyond the hull, then arrow away in precise unison.

Her face had relaxed in the sea-lit darkness. Jessamin had to turn away. Patrick had looked like that some nights. "I want some tea. You?"

"Thanks."

Jessamin got up suddenly, went over to the dispenser on the wall. No, Shira didn't know. Patrick had died the year before she had been born. "Patrick loved you." You, personally, child, you as a new race. "He . . . sacrificed everything to create you." And now I'm defending him, *I,* who have every reason to accuse him. Jessamin picked up a porcelain mug from the dresser, held it under the spout. Amber tea swirled into her cup, and she filled a second one for Shira. "Why do you hate him?" She turned around to find Shira staring at her, her eyes dark as the nighttime sea in the dim light.

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"So he loved us, huh?" Shira took the cup carefully, folding her webbing between her long fingers. "I have gills like a fish. That's what the people on shore call us, isn't it? Fish? That's all right." Her laugh was as harsh and dry as the sound of tearing paper. "We call *you* 'grubs.' My hair comes from fur-seal genes." She brushed one webbed hand over her head. "My metabolism comes from sharks and kangaroo rats and Weddell seals. I don't like your room upstairs. My gill gets squashed when I try to sleep in a bed, and it hurts. My toes catch on things, and you grubs don't make shoes to fit us." She raised her head slowly. "What am I, lady? Animal or human? You want to tell me? I guess the World Court is going to make up its mind one of these days. I can't wait." She stared down at the silk bedspread. "I spilled tea on your bed. I can't even hold a bloody cup."

"You can hold it just fine. Patrick made you as dexterous as any primate." Jessamin looked over the girl's bowed head, bitterness clogging her throat. Tanaka's marketing specialists had warned about a potential backlash against the proliferating genetic manipulation of the human genome. She hadn't listened. Because it had mattered so much to Patrick . . . and she had loved him.

Her mistake. You are responsible for your mistakes, even if you're Jessamin Chen.

But who had paid for this one? Patrick? This child and her siblings?

"We got sold out, you know." Shira stared into her cup. "Everybody knows it—that Tanaka nudged the media under the table. *Tanaka* really got the anti-fish riots going, just so they could shut down the program. Why?" Her voice quivered. "Because we cost too much? Why didn't they just *do* it—end the program? Why did they turn those crazies loose on us? They're out there all the time with their signs and their crosses and their slogans. Some of 'em have been around so long, they're almost . . . familiar." Her laugh had jagged edges, sharp as glass. "Like old friends."

"Tanaka didn't start the riots." The bitter, ugly truth of what Shira had just said dragged at her words, slowing them down. Tanaka hadn't *started* the riots, but neither had they tried very hard to defend their genen program. "The riots were directed against all human modification, not just you."

"But we were the only ones who weren't *people* any more. We're *fish*. Because of *Doyle*." Shira flung her cup at the wall. It shattered, tea splashing everywhere, running down the glass wall like dirty tears. She faced Jessamin, her eyes wide and dark in her pale face, breathing hard. "Let me tell you about Aaron. We were the last two . . . to be born. So we were always close. We were the youngest, you know? I . . . loved him." Her voice trembled. "And it really bugged him that we didn't matter.

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We *should* have. We can take care of the fish schools, do the exploring and the mining, work on undersea construction so much better than divers, or alvins, or remotes. But no one'll *let* us. And every day, the protesters hang around just outside the markers that the court's injunction set up. Close enough so we can see them. Close enough to hear them. It's like the judge *wanted* us to hear what they yell." She closed her eyes briefly. "You get used to it," she said in a flat, dead tone. "You tell yourself that you don't really hear it anymore when they call us Satan's children, or fish, or Frankensteins. Only you *do*, you know. You hear every fucking word. And one day this guy in this little grungy boat started calling us names. So what else is new, but this time Aaron . . . lost it."

She drew a shuddering breath. "He just took off—past the markers that're supposed to keep those creeps away from us. I was yelling at him, but he didn't hear me. It was like he was deaf. He came up out of the water like an orca and knocked the guy back into his boat. The grub gets up bleeding, screaming at Aaron, really out of control. And he revs up his boat." She looked away, face working, fighting tears. "He . . . ran Aaron down. The propeller blades . . . " She swallowed, struggling. "There were three other boats out there. Some of the people . . . cheered. Aaron was alive but . . . it's a long way back, and he was bleeding so bad. He . . . died on the way in."

Selkies could cry. Patrick hadn't taken that human trait away from them. Jessamin put a hand on Shira's shoulder, withdrew it as she tensed. "I'm sorry." Inadequate words, overused and meaningless. Words had so little power to touch human pain. Jessamin sighed, anger smoldering inside her, as useless as the words. "What happened to the protester?"

"He . . . said that it was an accident. An *accident*." She straightened, brushing the heels of her hands across her eyes like a blow. "He got fined and he didn't even lose the damned boat. Because . . . everybody *else* out there said it was an accident, too." Bitterness razored her voice. "Except me, and I don't count. Because the courts haven't decided if I'm human or a *fish*."

Jessamin looked beyond her, out into the depths of the sea. Black was softening to royal blue. Morning already? "So you went back and killed him?" she asked softly. "The one who ran Aaron down?"

"No." Shira looked away. "That's the *really* stupid part." Her voice cracked. "There were these guys—an old man and his kid—who ran tourists out in their boat. To look, you know? I think they gawked at the assholes with their silly signs more than at us." Her shoulders drooped. "I kind of knew them . . . I mean, they were always around. It was like . . . a job to them. They didn't hate us or anything. They'd come in real close to the markers, but the people on their boat never yelled

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anything at us, like they wouldn't let them." Her voice had faded to a whisper. "We were out working the fish pens, moving some young snapper into new space. It's just a game." Her voice grew bitter again. "Not a real fishery. Tanaka doesn't want us to do anything *real,* but I guess they've got to give us something to do. Aaron used to say that it was so they could write us off on their taxes. Anyway, the tourist boat was in real close, and this woman on their boat started *yelling* at me." She picked at the folded webbing between her thumb and forefinger.

"All of a sudden it was . . . too much. I guess that's what happened to Aaron." Her voice faltered. "Anyway, I started for the boat. I don't know what I meant to do, but the old man picked up a boat hook when I got close. He hit me with it. It *hurt,* and I grabbed it. He was so *weak.*" Her gill tunnel rippled and the puckered mouths opened, revealing a brief flash of blood-red membrane. "I pulled him overboard." She pressed both hands against her shuddering gill. "His head hit the side of the boat. It was such a wooden sound. And then he went down. I dove and grabbed him, but when I came up, everyone was screaming at me, and the kid was getting this *rifle* out from under the seat." She took her hands away from her gill, stared down at the faintly pulsing bulge. "I . . . I let go of him and took off."

Silence filled the room, thick as feathers.

"He drowned?"

Shira nodded, her eyes as bleak as a winter sky. "I didn't want to kill *him.*"

Patrick's face, Patrick's eyes. Jessamin looked away from her, glaring into the blue depths of the dawn sea. You are a cold goddess, she thought bleakly. You demand blood, and we keep on providing blood for you. Patrick had looked at her with those same bleak eyes on that long-ago morning when she had told him that they were cutting the genen program, that they weren't going to fight the World Court's injunction. He hadn't gotten angry, hadn't said anything.

Instead, he had walked out; down to the beach for his morning swim. *You* walked out on her, Patrick. Bitterness filled Jessamin's throat, stinging her eyes. You walked out on your daughter, on all your children. You walked out on *me,* and you wouldn't even try to understand. You wouldn't *hear* me, damn it! *You let this happen.*

Beyond the hull, the water was fading from royal blue to turquoise. Morning, yes. Jessamin sighed, hearing the creak of years in her bones. You could buy the appearance of youth, but you aged behind that mask of youthful flesh.

"Who are you?" Shira's voice was dull as a wave-worn stone. "You got to be somebody big in Tanaka, to know all about this stuff, right? What's it to you, *grub?* You worried about bad PR?"

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"Of course. Bad PR matters." Jessamin stared at the smooth, muscular curve of Shira's shoulders, at the fat-layered skin that kept out the cold. Patrick had spent so many *years* pregnant with this child. He had given her all his energy. There had been so little left for Jessamin, or anyone else. Jessamin leaned her forehead against the cool slick polyglass.

And once again, the fishery was up for grabs. Something moved in the turquoise distance beyond the hull—a small shark, perhaps, out cruising for breakfast. "Let me tell you a story," Jessamin said softly. "Once upon a time there was a man who loved the sea. He loved her so much that he got pregnant by her, and had a child who could live in the sea. And he was very proud of her, but one day, some fishermen threatened to kill the sea. The only thing that could save the sea was to sacrifice their daughter. The man who loved the sea couldn't do it."

The shark had vanished. Silvery bubbles trailed past the hull, and a jellyfish, caught in the turbulence as the boat moved slowly through the calming sea. What color had his towel been that morning? She'd found it with his shoes and his shorts, folded neatly above the high-tide line. They had never recovered his body. His lover had kept it. "I'm Jessamin Chen." She turned away from the window, feeling old, no matter how young science kept her flesh, feeling *ancient.*

"Jessamin Chen?" Shira's face went blank with surprise. "*The* Jessamin Chen? The one who runs the whole show?" She looked down at the silk comforter beneath her, lifted her head to stare around at the glass-walled room. "You really *are,* aren't you?" Webbing bulged whitely between her long fingers as she slowly clenched her fists. "You did it," she whispered. "*You're* the one who shut down our program. *You* stuck us in that cage and forgot about us! You *abandoned* us!"

Jessamin stepped back, suddenly aware of the strength in this child's body, aware of her own fragility. "I didn't forget you." Anger flooded her and she straightened, throwing her shoulders back. "I didn't finish my story. The man who loved the sea wouldn't sacrifice their daughter to save her. He loved her too much. So *I* did it," she said softly. "Hunger is very immediate. It blinds you to the future, and the world is very hungry. I threw you to them—to the hungry people—and while they squabbled over whether you were fish or human, I fenced the sea with bars that they couldn't get through. Not Tanaka. *Me. I* did it." Jessamin caught her breath, held out her hands, palm up, empty. "Patrick Doyle abandoned you when he committed suicide." And you abandoned me, too, Patrick. She closed her hands slowly, lowered them. Didn't you know how much you *meant* to me? "I didn't abandon you. *I* knew exactly what I was doing."

"Sacrificing us?" Shira lunged to her feet. "For your own damn good? *You, Tanaka,* the *grubs.* You won't let us *do* anything." She was shaking.

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"Aaron died because he didn't have any reason to *live*. Because you won't let us *matter*. *You* killed him!" She flung herself at Jessamin.

Jessamin slapped her. The backhand blow caught Shira full on the cheek, sent her reeling onto the bed. She caught herself with a cry, and crouched, eyes wide and wild, gill-tunnel fluttering.

"Yes," Jessamin said harshly. "Sometimes you have to choose. Sometimes the right answer feels like shit, but it's *right,* so you choose it anyway. No matter who gets hurt. I had to choose between you and the sea. I chose the sea, because *none* of us can live without her." She rubbed her knuckles, eyeing the darkening bruise on Shira's face. "If you have to blame someone, blame Patrick for sticking me with the choice," she said bitterly. "Blame your *father*."

"No." Shira's body jerked as if Jessamin had slapped her again. "Not *my* father." Her eyes blazed. "I was *grown*, remember? I don't have any parents, I came from a petrie dish."

"Oh, you're his, all right." Jessamin flung the words, hard as stones, wanting to hurt, because this was Patrick's daughter and the child of his lover, the sea. "Do you think your last name's an accident? Call up his picture from the files and then go look in the damn *mirror!*"

From beyond the hull, an engine muttered, growing louder. Not possible. Security would have warned her, identified the plane. Jessamin looked up the stair, suddenly uneasy. It sounded like a VTOL. Why would it be out here? Only one or two people in Tanaka knew how to find her. In the no-privacy world of the Net, safety came from invisibility in the physical world. This hard-to-find boat was her safety. "Security?" She said sharply. "Status report."

All secure.

Yeah, sure. The *clunk* of a landing shivered through the hull.

Security hadn't reported it—which wasn't possible, but Jessamin didn't waste any time on that one. Turning her back on Shira, she darted over to the terminal and touched it to life. Shifting curtains of light and color danced above the terminal stage. "System!" She snapped her fingers in a twisting skein of opalescent blue. "Security report."

Nothing happened.

No one could subvert her System. "Access Carla Chen, private, emergency interrupt."

Crimson spiraled through the shimmering light, spiked by bursts of lemon yellow. No face appeared. Someone had subverted her entire system. That couldn't happen. Someone had landed on her boat, when her Security system should have known instantly if any plane, boat, or sub for a hundred miles in any direction was even headed in her direction. Cold fear was gathering in her chest like a coastal fog. Jessamin walked over to the nightstand beside the bed and yanked open the drawer.

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The licensed gun she kept there was gone.

Another impossibility. Add it to the list. Jessamin touched the smooth wood of the empty drawer. No one had been on this boat while she was in Zurich. Security would have logged it, right? Yeah, *right*. She laughed a single, dry note.

"What's wrong with you?" Shira was on her feet, back against the hull, as if she expected Jessamin to attack her.

"I have a visitor." She had never hidden in her life; not from truth, not from choices. Jessamin grabbed the handrail and started up the stairway. Halfway up, she paused, looked back. "I have no answers for you," she said softly. "I wish I did." Then she turned and marched up the stairs to the main deck.

Her intruder was waiting for her, lounging casually in her recliner.

Paul. He leaned back, his posture relaxed, the thick, fashionable tail of his blond hair falling carefully over one shoulder. A pose, but his familiar perfect smile hit her harder than the sound of the landing plane, the crash of her System, or her missing gun. "What . . . are you doing here?" She clung to the railing, groping for anger, finding only the echoes of age and mortality. "You're still in Europe."

"Did I scare you, Jessamin?" He smiled. "I'm sorry. A lot of people think I'm in Europe, but I'm not. I got back before you did. You hired me because I was good with the Net, remember? That's why your security doorbell didn't ring."

That pleased smirk cut through Jessamin's fear. Prick. Damned if she was scared of *him*. She stomped up the stairs and stood in front of him. "Spill it, Paul." Brave words, riding on a fragile shell of precious anger. She had no control over this situation and she had *always* had control. Over Tanaka. Over Carla. Her control had begun to erode when she had dragged Patrick's daughter on board. With an effort, Jessamin didn't look back at the stair. He didn't seem to realize that Shira was down there. Her unknown presence increased Jessamin's confidence slightly. The situation wasn't as stable as Paul thought, and she'd had a lot of practice turning unstable situations into successes. "So you've been playing your skillful little games with my Network Security. You're better than I thought. I'm impressed." She eyed him as if he was a regional manager who'd fucked up. "What's your game, Paul?" Fearless words, but she heard the quiver in her voice, saw his eyes flicker as he heard it, too. "Tell me fast, because I'm busy, and you only have ten minutes before Tanaka Security shows up from Briard."

"We both know better than that, Jess." He held out his hand to her. "So let's stop playing games. It's time for you to retire. You were planning to do it in Zurich, remember? You promised Carla, and then you didn't come through."

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"Carla." Jessamin took a step backward, lightheaded with sudden comprehension. Carla could give Paul the access he needed to get into her System. Carla knew about the gun in the bedside drawer. . . ."She can't wait?" The words caught like fishbones in her throat. "She was always too damned impatient."

"No!" Paul's eyes flashed. "This is *my* doing, not hers. She's been *too* patient. You're never going to give her a chance, never going to let anyone else run the show, because you'll never believe that anyone is as *good* as you!"

"She's *not* as good as me. Not yet." Jessamin lifted her chin, met his cold eyes—and saw belief there. The same faith she'd seen once in Patrick's eyes. It jarred her badly. Who did he have such faith in? Carla? "She's my daughter, Paul." Her voice shook, in spite of herself. "Do you think she'll let you run the show when she takes over?" Anger seized her in its fist, and suddenly she didn't *care*. "Do you think it matters to her that you're her lover? Are you that *stupid?*"

With an inarticulate growl, he lunged at her, hands reaching, face twisted with sudden rage.

Jessamin spun away from him, but her foot slipped on the water she and Shira had dripped all over the floor. Paul's hand closed on her arm, and he spun her against him, in a dark parody of a lover's embrace. Death and love, were they so far apart? Jessamin struggled for breath as his arms tightened around her. You opened your legs and your soul, you gave up a part of yourself that you never regained. Patrick had walked into the sea with his arms open, into the arms of his lover. He had chosen the sea over her, and he'd taken a part of her with him. "Let go of me," she gasped. "Will you stop and *think*, you fool?"

"Oh, I have. Accidental drowning," Paul panted in her ear. "Easy when you insist on going out on deck during a storm. Your Security videos show you out there, just before the system goes down. The waves are very unpredictable, and you're so sure you're immortal. You must have released your safety line while you were tying down the VTOL. People will believe it." His tone mocked her. "You're so *macho*." The door opened for them automatically, and Paul dragged her outside.

It shocked her, how strong he was. Because it showed her how weak *she* was? I am not weak, she wanted to scream. I have manipulated the world's use of the sea for three decades. I have controlled it. *I am not weak*. Crushed in his embrace, his harsh breath hot on her neck, she couldn't even struggle.

Carla knew about this, whether Paul admitted it or not. Carla wanted her dead. The wind had shredded the storm clouds, and bright sun shone in a blue sky, glittering up from a puddle on the wet deck. Paul dragged

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her closer to the railing, and, for a moment, her muscles went slack, accepting the verdict, accepting Death as a lover, as Patrick had done.

Yes, and they'd find Shira Doyle's traces all over the boat. One killing, two—it would be easier to believe the second time around. Carla was competent. She would feed Shira to the media as extra insurance against discovery. She, Jessamin, would have done the same in her place. The rail banged her hip. Jessamin closed her teeth against a cry as Paul levered her over, damned if she'd give him the satisfaction of her fear. Shira hadn't chosen to help her—Jessamin Chen, the enemy. Why should she? She didn't know Carla—didn't know that she would simply become another sacrifice, like Aaron. The rail banged her knee, and Jessamin felt one piercing moment of terror.

Falling. . . . Rush of air. . . . Crash of shock and spray, cold closing over her head, closing her throat. Cold arms . . . Patrick's arms? You played God, Patrick, she cried silently. You created your children from DNA's raw clay. But you weren't enough of a God to stay and love them. To stay and fight to protect them. Her head broke the surface and she gasped blessed air, choking as a wavelet slapped her face. *Cold.* She ignored it, ducked under the surface again, half afraid that Paul might mean to shoot her from the deck. But no, that would spoil the accidental drowning scenario if they recovered her body. She yanked her sweats down around her ankles, dragged her feet free. Better. Now the shirt. She broke the surface again, stripping her arms out of the sleeves, releasing the heavy waterlogged fabric to sink slowly into the depths.

Struggling to get her breath, to relax, Jessamin slid up the glassy hillside of an oncoming swell, enclosed by blue sky and green sea, her breasts lifting in the water as she swam slowly over the wave's crest.

The boat was so far *away.*

Paul had gauged the current accurately, had put her over where she would have to swim against it to catch up to the boat. That way, there would be no need to alter the nav-system. Yes, it would look like an accident. Or murder by a distraught, angry child. Jessamin swam after the boat with slow, dogged strokes. She licked her lips. Salt. Patrick always tasted of salt when they made love, he always tasted of the sea. Once, she had been a strong swimmer. Once she had been young, and so sure of herself. Would Paul stay on the boat, waiting to make sure that she drowned? If he had crashed Security, he would have no way to see her except through binoculars. She slid down into another trough and the boat vanished, leaving her alone with endless sky and water. Fear squeezed her slowly, like a vise closing around her heart. She wasn't so strong anymore. Already her leg muscles ached.

Nothing to do but swim. She had never been a quitter. Not like you, Patrick. You quit. You wouldn't let yourself understand what I was

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doing. Instead you just walked away, into your damn lover's arms. Jessamin paused briefly, treading water. The cold was sucking energy from her body. Soon, she'd lose the struggle to keep swimming, would go down, her flesh fighting desperately for life in those last agonizing seconds. Patrick had died like that. I didn't betray you, she cried silently. Why wouldn't you *listen?* The boat seemed so distant now—another universe, one that had no real meaning. This was a world of water, and, out here, *she* was the alien. Patrick was right.

Only the sea can save us, someone said softly. *But only if we save the sea first. . . .*

"Patrick?" Jessamin kicked, rising chest high out of the water. "Patrick, is that you?" Her strength failed and she sank, water stinging her nose, closing briefly over her head.

We're aliens here. His voice sounded close in her ear, intimate and relaxed, as if he was lying beside her in bed. *We don't belong and we know it, and because we know it, we don't really care. . . .*

How could he sound so relaxed when she was dying? Jessamin broke the surface and gasped for breath. "I care! Damn it . . . I care . . . and I made sure Tanaka cares. Does it matter that we care for profit? Couldn't you *understand?* You were such a . . . damned *idealist.*" He was *there,* down in the bluegreen water, looking up at her. His dark hair drifted like weeds in the swell, and tiny, brilliant fish wove intricate patterns around him. He looked so *sad.*

"Patrick. . . . " She swallowed, her throat tight with tears. I never cried, she thought dully. I never cried for you. "I saved the sea. *I* did, Patrick. I gave it to Tanaka and Tanaka takes care of it. Because I love it, too. I told you that, but you wouldn't listen, you wouldn't see beyond your own love, you couldn't let me *share.* Patrick?" Longing seized her suddenly, a compilation of all those nights alone, those days of struggle, walled in with silence. "I miss you."

He reached for her, his long fingers greenish white like the belly of a fish, trailing a strand of brown weed. Jessamin stretched to take his hand, tired suddenly, wanting so much to touch him again, to have him pull her close and hold her. . . .

And his daughter would be blamed for two murders. And Jessamin would never know if her own daughter had asked Paul to kill her or not.

"No," she cried, and her mouth filled with water.

Patrick vanished. The sea clutched her, holding her with cold arms, lover Death. Jessamin kicked, summoning the last of her strength, struggling for the surface. Or was it the surface? And did it matter, if the boat was a mile away? Confused, blood roaring in her ears, Jessamin floundered. I don't want to die, she thought, and the *clarity* of that desire made her want to cry.

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It was darker, as if she was sinking deeper, down to where Patrick waited for her. Too late, she thought bitterly. Just a little bit too late.

Something was hurting her. She almost ignored it, but there was more pain. With an effort, she focused on it; fingers digging into her flesh, pulling on her. That touch cleared the darkness from her vision, as if life itself was soaking through her rescuer's skin, seeping like oxygenated blood into her veins. Jessamin kicked, kicked again, lungs on fire suddenly, aching with the need to breathe *now. Now!*

Water exploded against her face and she gasped, choking as a wave slapped her, choking, coughing so hard that red agony squeezed her chest. How could it hurt so much to breathe? She was nothing but a pair of lungs. Everything else had dissolved into a distant gray mist beyond the immediacy of breathing. She panted, sucking air in tortured partial lungfuls, as if water had filled her up after all, as if she had drowned and been raised from the dead.

Almost.

"Lie *still.* You grubs can't swim for shit, and you're going to stick your elbow in my gill again. *I'll* do it."

"Shira?" The word came out as an incomprehensible croak. Jessamin twisted in the water, the kaleidoscope world refocusing slowly, solidifying into green sea, incredibly blue sky, and a view of Shira's pale cheek not too far from her own.

"You'll have to hang onto my shoulders," Shira panted. "Think you can do that much?"

She was swimming on her side, one shoulder rammed between Jessamin's shoulderblades, supporting her awkwardly, so that Jessamin didn't squash her gill tunnel closed. Jessamin rolled slowly over, terrified suddenly that Shira would let go, that she'd sink and the sea would claim her after all. Her hands closed on Shira's thick, cold shoulders.

"Ouch! Easy, okay?" Shira put her head down and began to swim.

Water would be flowing through that marvelous tunnel, loaded with oxygen. Fish-girl. Oh yes, I need you. Jessamin wanted to laugh, swallowed it because it was hysteria and once she started, she'd never stop. A swell lifted them, and Jessamin saw the distant hull of the boat, like a white swan, like salvation. "Paul," she whispered.

Shira paused, lifting her head out of the water. "If you mean the grub, he took off in his little plane. He didn't even *look* to see if anyone else was on board. Stupid grub!"

He *wouldn't* look. Security had showed Jessamin to him alone, before he crashed it. He wouldn't expect a selkie to show up, and he'd be afraid of leaving traces that a forensic team might pick up. You're *careless,* Paul! Jessamin stifled another clutch of laughter as they slid up and over the next swell. That's why you're second-rate.

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Slowly, slowly, the white swan enlarged to boat-size. When they finally reached the dive-deck, Shira had to boost Jessamin out onto the mesh platform. Exhausted, shivering, Jessamin sprawled on the decking, basking in air that felt warm as July. Shira scrambled up beside her, awkward as a seal on land. Water clear as tears ran from her deflating gill. A tiny orange crab slid out through the puckering lips of the tunnel and scrabbled down across the blue fabric of her swim trunks. Jessamin shuddered in spite of herself. Slowly, she reached out to stroke the cold flaccid skin. Shira flinched and looked at her with bitter eyes.

"Fish," Jessamin said softly. "We're right to call you that, we grubs. You don't belong on land. Patrick Doyle didn't *want* you to belong. He wanted you to be as alien on land as we are in the sea. He didn't want you to give a damn about us." She drew an aching wonderful breath. "Why did you come help me?"

Shira looked out at the endless horizon of sky and sea. "Because you didn't . . . apologize." She pressed her lips together. "And because . . . I wanted to ask if you were . . . telling me the truth. About Patrick Doyle being . . . my father."

"Genetically, yes." Jessamin sat up. "You were right, though. You were made—by a man who played God and loved you. But not enough." Jessamin sighed, aware of the years graven in her flesh. Was the soul an endless quantity, or was it a finite thing? Could you run out of soul before your body died? We could have done it together, she thought and smothered a pang of sorrow. "I have to go talk to my daughter." She staggered to her feet, still shivering. "Right now."

"I'm out of here." Shira stood, her eyes narrowing, wariness descending over her face like a mask.

She was seeing Jessamin Chen, again. Enemy. Jailor with the keys to a prison cell. "Not yet." Jessamin held out a hand, unsteady on her feet. "Will you wait until I talk to Carla? I owe you, and I might be able to . . . do something." She tried to meet Shira's eyes, failed. "After that, I won't try to stop you if you want to run."

Shira hesitated, her face full of youth and suspicion, maybe regretting her impulsive rescue.

"For Aaron," Jessamin said and caught the girl's tiny twitch of reaction. "Please?"

"You can't do anything for Aaron." Shira's lips thinned. "But I'll stick around for a few minutes just to make sure you're okay."

Carla crossed her arms on her desktop, her expression impatient. "What is it now, Mother?"

Cold in spite of her dry clothes, Jessamin searched her daughter's face. Guilt? Surprise? Or was her resigned resentment of another interruption

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genuine? She couldn't tell. Carla was her mother's daughter, Jessamin thought bitterly. She drew a slow, careful breath. "I created you, Carla. I engineered you as surely as Patrick engineered his selkies." She swallowed, tears knotting her throat, because she had wanted Carla to be good, and she *was*. "I created you to run Tanaka as well as I do, and then I wouldn't let you do it. Paul was right about that much."

"What are you talking about?" Carla sat up straight.

"Did you try to kill me, Carla?"

She had wanted to see the mask drop for just an instant, to read hate perhaps on her daughter's face. What is hate, but the reverse of love, with as much power and as much intimacy? But Carla merely stared from the holo stage, her eyes as hard and unreadable as polished stones, her face still. "No," she said coolly. "Of course I didn't. Although I have considered it."

Jessamin bent her head, surprised by the strength of her disappointment. She had wanted to see . . . *some*thing on her daughter's face. "I thought about killing Kazi," she said softly. "It wasn't necessary, because he was never as good as I am. I crafted you. I made you in my image. Sometimes you have to choose between love and truth," she said softly. "It can be a hell of a choice. So I took the pain of that choice away from you. I made you better than me." Not "as good." Better. Not yet, but soon. Jessamin looked away from her daughter's cold face. "Paul tried to drown me, to make it look like an accident. There was a witness. Do you understand me, Carla?"

"The stupid little boy." Her tone gave nothing away. "I can believe he'd try something insane like that. The jerk."

No, Carla would never have to choose between love and duty. Love would never tip the scale for her. Jessamin wondered if Paul had truly thought he was doing this on his own, without Carla's knowledge. He would have been easy to manipulate. Perhaps it hadn't taken much of a hint at all. Or perhaps Carla hadn't even had to hint. Perhaps Paul *had* done this out of love. Poor fool. Jessamin straightened her shoulders, meeting her daughter's cold eyes. "This . . . affair was handled clumsily. If I choose, I can use it to take Aquaculture away from you forever. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." Carla's voice was steady, but twin spots of color glowed on her cheeks. "I made a mistake."

I made a mistake. The words settled like stones around Jessamin's neck; a necklace that she would wear forever. Jessamin straightened beneath its weight, and managed a cold smile. Next time, Carla wouldn't trust someone else. Next time, she would handle the job herself. You're responsible for your own mistakes, even if you're a Chen. Always. "You'll be good for Tanaka." Jessamin nodded. "You'll take care of the sea to

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keep Tanaka profitable. God help the Coalition, or anyone else who gets in your way."

"What is the price, Mother?"

Jessamin looked through the hull of the boat, out into the blue murk of the sea. A small school of squid jetted by like a flight of missiles. Alien world. She turned back to the holo stage and bowed; deeply, formally, like Kazuyuki Itano had bowed to her on that long ago afternoon when she had broken his power. "I am resigning." Jessamin suppressed a bitter smile at Carla's carefully neutral expression. Oh yes, she *was* good. "There's a price, of course. First, I want the selkies. I'm going to set up a private firm; a contract labor operation, most likely. I have enough to buy out their contracts without hurting Tanaka. They're a red-ink drain, anyway. We're both recording. I, Jessamin Chen, acknowlege that my resignation is effective as soon as the aforementioned transfer of the Aquatic Specialist contracts is complete."

Carla had gone still. She hadn't expected this. An upfront and open Jessamin Chen must be an unknown quantity to her. And to me, Jessamin thought and smiled. Carla was looking for the trap.

"It's a PR risk to Tanaka," she said at last.

"We'll negotiate it. Our media whiz-kids can work out the details of diverting world attention." It's not a trap, she wanted to say. I can't make up for you, or for Patrick, but maybe I can give his children a chance to grow up. She didn't say it. Carla wouldn't understand.

Carla was nodding, her expression wary, reassured perhaps by the recording. "What about . . . Paul?"

Will you ever put anyone ahead of Tanaka? Jessamin looked into her daughter's cold eyes, looked away. No, she wouldn't. "I'm not going to prosecute." Not with contract negotiations coming up. "I'm going to destroy him personally." Because word got around in the worldweb, and you were either strong or weak, predator or prey. She would never be prey. Jessamin let her breath out in a slow sigh, more tired than she had ever been. Perhaps she *was* running out of soul.

"Good-bye, Carla, and congratulations on your assumption of Aquaculture. You're going to have one hell of a fight with the Coalition, but you'll win. House? Endit." She turned away as Carla's wary face vanished.

Shira sat on the stairs, out of range of the video pickups, her face as wary and unbelieving as Carla's.

"I just bought your contract." She met Shira's angry young eyes. "I'm going to form a new firm. Contract labor. Very specialized. We might even get some jobs from Tanaka."

"She tried to kill you." Shira's eyes didn't soften. "You're going to let her go."

"She's good." Jessamin met her stare. "The sea needs her."

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"The sea." Shira's voice was low and rough. "That's what matters. Not *us*. The sea."

"That's right," Jessamin said softly. "That's what matters." I wanted you to understand, Patrick. That it mattered to me, too. I thought you did. She closed her eyes briefly.

"What about me?" Shira looked away, her shoulders drooping. "What about the man I killed?"

Too late for him and for Aaron. Almost too late for her. Jessamin sighed for the scared kid behind the angry eyes. "Life isn't fair, and it never will be. You can't just go back to your siblings."

"Another sacrifice?" Shira hunched her shoulders.

"Yes."

"Why shouldn't I just *leave?*" Shira's mouth twisted. "I could live in the sea. I don't need you, or your promises, or any of this shit."

"Aaron needed it," Jessamin said softly. "That's why he died, remember?"

Shira's head drooped. "What difference does it make?" she whispered. "We're *made*. Even if Tanaka wanted to make more of us, there's a moratorium on creating new genens, remember? We get to go extinct in a single generation."

"What?" Jessamin realized her mouth was hanging open, closed it abruptly. "If nobody's pregnant, then someone has used contraceptive implants on you. Don't you *know?*" So. Even within Tanaka, you could find a conspiracy of silence and prejudice. She laughed softly. "Patrick was a perfectionist, and he shared everything with me." Except his love for the sea. She wanted to laugh again, but it would have turned into a sob. "He was creating a new race, Shira, not some refined SCUBA system for Tanaka's workforce. He was playing God. Oh yes, you can get pregnant. You can have a dozen kids, and they'll be just like you. Patrick was good. He was the best." Her voice cracked and she reached out, touched Shira's too-cold cheek. "And I'm the best, too," she said sadly. She touched her fingertips to her lips, tasting salt, like the sea, like the taste of Patrick's skin when they made love. "Carla will take care of the sea," she said softly. "The rest is up to us."

"Us," Shira said slowly. "All right, *us*, then." She hunched her shoulders, then let them drop. "What about me?" she whispered. "The sacrifice."

"It's not hard to add a name and history to a personnel database. Not if you have the access and the talent, and I own better Net operators than Paul. So we'll add a new member to Briard's genen population. A female—assigned as personal caretaker of my so-private boat." She smiled crookedly. "All fish look alike to us grubs, right?" Jessamin stared into the soft turquoise of her alien world. Maybe . . . it hadn't been suicide

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after all. Maybe his lover had finally claimed him. "You're not just altered humans," she said softly. "You're something new. *Homo aquaticus.* One day, you'll take on Tanaka. And you'll win, because I will have taught you how to win." Sorry, Carla, but I'm better than you. For the moment. Jessamin held out her hand to Shira, palm cringing just a little at the soft alien feel of her folded webbing. *Selkies. Homo aquaticus.* "Your children will take the sea away from us," she said sadly. "You won't give them any choice." ●

NEXT ISSUE

It's our seventeenth anniversary next month, and, in honor of that, our April issue will be an immense Double-Length Seventeenth Anniversary Issue, a very special issue indeed, a huge package stuffed to the seams with stories by the Biggest Names in science fiction, as well as exciting work by some of SF's rising new stars.

First, multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Robert Silverberg** returns with our April cover story, "Via Roma"—a big, complex, and evocative new novella that takes us sideways in time to a world where the Roman Empire *never* fell, and the Pax Romana still holds sway over the entire globe (although it's fraying a bit around the edges), and then sweeps us along on an eventful journey, full of passion and intrigue, to the Eternal City itself, Rome... which, Eternal or not, turns out to be trembling dangerously on the verge of change....

Then we have the bittersweet honor of presenting what we believe is the very last new story by **Isaac Asimov** that you'll ever see *anywhere,* the last of the long-running George and Azazel series, as our late founder, perhaps the most famous science fiction writer of the twentieth century, takes a shrewd and funny look at what it takes to "March Against the Foe."

But, exciting as all that is, it isn't even *close* to being all we have in store for you in this monumental issue! Take a look:

ALSO IN APRIL: multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner—and recent Grandmaster—**Frederik Pohl** gives us a wry and surprising study of "Redemption in the Quantum Realm"; Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick** treats us to the latest installment of his hugely popular "Kirinyaga" series, this one, one of the most powerful in the whole sequence, describing the disturbing effects of having "A Little Knowledge"; the popular **Alexander Jablokov** returns with an intricate and powerful new novella, "Syrtis"—a deadly pavane of committment and betrayal set against the backdrop of a bizarre and fascinatingly complex future society struggling for power and survival on a terra-

(Continued on page 126)

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ON THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING

You test the weight of your theory,
toss it up, a perfect arc
from palm to palm.
You keep your eyes focused
straight ahead, concentrating
out of the corners of your eyes,
Electromagnetism shuttles
back and forth.

When you feel confident you move to two,
adding the Weak Force
to your equation.
They pass in the center,
one thrown over the other.

You juggle for a while
then move to three,
the Strong Force flying
smoothly with the others
in perfect syzygy.

Feeling cocky
you add Gravity
too soon.
Your timing off,
all your theories fall,
bouncing slightly as they disappear
under the lab tables
and behind the door.

Sometimes you think you'll never juggle
four.

—Lawrence Schimel

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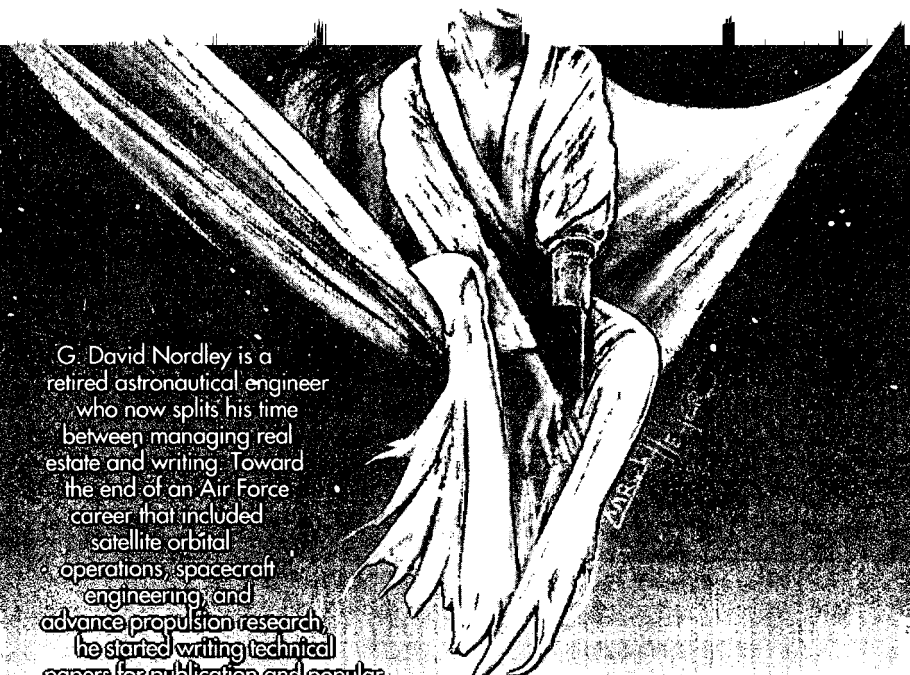

G. David Nordley is a retired astronautical engineer who now splits his time between managing real estate and writing. Toward the end of an Air Force career that included satellite orbital operations, spacecraft engineering, and advance propulsion research, he started writing technical papers for publication and popular articles for his Astronomy Club newsletter. Working with Dr. Robert L. Forward on antimatter propulsion stimulated him to revive a long-dormant interest in writing science fiction. His first published story appeared in the May 1991 issue of *Analog* and he has since sold nine other tales. "The Day of their Coming" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

art: Carol Heyer

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They say you always remember just where you were when great events happen. On the morning of the twenty third of Taurus, I was wandering alone along the shore of the Chryse Sea, near the creek that cut through the bluff below our family home, when the universe changed.

The woodpeckers had wakened me that morning, tapping their way into my dreams, forcing me to admit that the night was gone and that I had perhaps a few precious minutes left to slip out and watch the sunrise before Mom and Dad woke up and started to throw chores around. It was clear and cool, about twenty-two Celsius or so, which, I reflected, was about as *warm* as it ever got on old Mars. So I put on a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt, and slipped out the screen door, and headed barefoot down the sandy path past the guest house, over the reddish dunes toward the sea.

The Ritters were sleeping in the guest house, with their daughter Krin. Krin and I had grown up next door to each other, and we had been just getting to know each other again at that age when people start becoming people when Dad had gotten a raise and we'd moved to a bigger house in another neighborhood. She was a little bigger than me in the year before we left, so when we played games, she was the princess of Mars, I was her slave, and I had to do what she said. Anything at all. Like taking the trash out. That move had been my first heartbreak; our families kept in touch, but, in an adult world, kids' friendships are expendable. Krin and I saw each other long enough to say hello maybe every year or so, when the families got together.

The early morning was my silent, clean, private, magic time. Martian shortwing daygulls were soaring, cawing, looking for shellfish on the receding tide. The sun poked up over the woods on the eastern shore of the bay, a spot of brilliant yellow. I wished Krin was with me. She liked the sun; we'd gone swimming and sunbathing together every year since we'd built the place.

Half-daydreaming, I was looking at a big frog, who was thinking that he was invisible, sitting among the stones in the creek which flowed into the bay, the water glittering gold now with sunrise, when Mom called out down the hill in her opera-singing voice to say that an alien starship had arrived.

Mom wouldn't kid about something like that, and so I ran up to the house as fast as I could.

When I got there, Mrs. Ritter was making breakfast for us, while Dad, Dr. Ritter, and Krin had their eyes glued to a long-range view of the starship being displayed on the living room viewscreen, listening to Elin Komoto and a host of other newsreaders talking excitedly about how the alien spacecraft had just suddenly shown up in the Martian orbital traffic pattern and asked for port clearance in perfect English.

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The alien starship was different from anything of ours—a single large sphere rather than a ring of spheres. I looked for Mom, but she was already on the phone with some of her engineering friends in the study. I sat next to Krin, close enough to touch, but she didn't seem to notice—with *that* to look at, I didn't wonder. My own thoughts, however, kept bouncing between her and the starship.

It was only in the last couple years that we'd become good friends again; Krin had put away chasing frogs and salamanders for big-girl things much earlier than I had been ready to change. At four, her hair had turned from gold to brown, she was taller than I was, and she didn't want much to do with me. By the time we were five, I was reading voraciously, and had some grown-up things to talk about, too, but we didn't see each other that year.

I started having fantasies about her when I was six, the year we built this country house. Dad wanted to get back to the land; Viking City had been getting too crowded for him. The Ritters had visited for a day that year, and I had shown Earth, Venus, and mighty Jove to Krin on that special summer evening. Then, the following year, we'd actually held hands, briefly.

So when the Ritters had arrived at the "farm" two days earlier I was already full of anticipation. Krin was only a month short of her eighth Martian birthday, and we were still about the same height. Her hair was a sun-lightened reddish brown, cut self-confidently and boyishly short. We were both bookworms now, and instant buddies again. But she shattered my romantic dreams by announcing that she now had a very serious boyfriend, a New Reformationist named Ed Kelso, back at Marsport Prep, so that whatever we did was just for old times and not serious.

She wore a ring with a fish symbol, but she wasn't married *yet,* and I resolved to try to show her a better alternative without being too pushy about it. I hoped that Ed Kelso wasn't the jealous type.

"When will we see the aliens?" Krin asked.

Dr. Ritter frowned. He was a big man with short white hair, and when he frowned, it looked serious. "We should have pictures by now. I don't understand why we don't."

"I wonder how the starship works?" I added. "A pusher beam would hit it straight on and fry the crew. Dad, do you think they have some other kind of drive?"

"Too early to tell. They've got Ellie working on it already." He nodded toward Mom.

Dr. Ritter was drafted too. He took his first call in the kitchen, because Mom had the study tied up. Later on, the people to whom he was talking became the Contact Committee, but just then everyone was scrambling. The government had asked the starship to hold off Phobos, away from

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the congestion of the port of Deimos, and equally far away from public and academic scrutiny.

We spent the rest of the early morning laughing at the media instant analysis people getting all sorts of technical stuff wrong by trying to oversimplify, or just by being scientifically over their heads. Komoto did the best, as I remember, just sticking to what, when, and where. Once, she started to read something about the aliens coming twenty-five parsecs in three and a half years, then stopped, saying: "Well, *that* has nothing to do with reality," and moved to something else.

Dad explained, "It should have been about three and a half parsecs in twenty-five years. If they'd use light years instead of parsecs, no one would get confused. Also, the aliens' planet, Kor, is *not* Tau Ceti: Kor is a planet around another star further away. But this ship came *from* Tau Ceti, and, reasonably enough, identified itself as originating there." He grimaced. "Those government flacks will have everyone calling the Korkol 'Tau Cetians' for years."

It didn't help that the New Reformationists were claiming that it was all a hoax and whining about balanced reporting. This sort of obfuscation should have been a warning, but my mind was elsewhere. With the Ritters planning to leave tomorrow, I didn't have much time left with Krin, and I began to resent the aliens for monopolizing what little there was left. So, when we realized they'd just been saying the same thing over and over again for the last half hour, I asked Krin out for a swim.

She laughed. "Okay. I'm bored and it's hot. Just don't tell Ed."

We excused ourselves and headed for the lake, really just a very wide section of the creek that flowed into the sea. I dropped my shorts on the towels and waded in. She followed, still wearing her long white New Reformationists shirt.

"Wait a minute," I protested. "Nobody swims with their clothes on!"

"The New Reformationists do. Ed says nobody should see a woman's body except her man."

"Krin, I've already seen your body, every time you've been out here. Besides, that thing will get all wet. Your mom and my mom don't wear anything when they swim and nothing's ever happened to them because of it. Not that you look like Mom, yet."

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Wait until Ed and I start having babies." Then she looked serious for a moment. "I've got to get used to a lot of new ideas. But you're right, it's silly." She dropped the shirt on the pile of towels and clothes. "I'll beat you across the lake!"

A hundred yards across the lake was a beach. She beat me there easily: she'd been on the academy swim team until she'd met Ed. We laid out on the sand and talked.

"Just think, we're completely out of sight of anything *artificial*; just

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the sand, the sky, and the water, and us!" Of course, I could have said that the sand and water and air and sky were all *there* in the first place by courtesy of planetary engineering, but I didn't want to break her mood.

"I can't talk like this with Ed," she said. "They have guys' stuff here and women's stuff there, all segregated. I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

I just couldn't see Krin as a New Reformationist.

The news people had thought they'd have pictures of the aliens by noon, so we swam back across, wrapped the towels around our waists, and, carrying our clothes, made our way home, dripping through the dunes and trees. By the time we got back, the warm breeze from the Tharsis high desert had us pretty much dry, and the news coverage was still on. But it was putting out even less information than before.

Komoto was interviewing a New Reformationist bishop who was pointing out that nobody had actually *seen* an alien yet, that no one had actually seen the ship come from outside the solar system, and that the whole thing could have been faked. Ten years later, of course, they're sending missions to Tau Ceti and saying this was all part of the great plan foretold in New Reformation scripture. But that day, this bozo was trying to deny the whole thing, and Krin didn't look happy at all listening to him. I caught Dr. Ritter looking at her very thoughtfully.

There were no pictures of aliens yet. Komoto was reporting that the authorities said that there were "delays in working out the digital interface" between the starship and the planetary communications net, with a skeptical edge to her voice, when the house interrupted to tell Mom that the local newspeople wanted to set up an interview about the alien propulsion system. She told it that she didn't know anything about the particulars yet, but to tell them she would be happy to talk about the general subject.

Frustrated with the news pablum, Krin and I went to my room to look for some real background. I dug out a cyberbook and some data wands, loaded one on spacecraft, and flopped down on the rug. I called up a diagram of the solar system navigation aids to show how the aliens had surprised everyone by coming in from far below the plane of the planets' orbits. All the radar and optics were concentrated on the ecliptic, where all the traffic was. Krin's arm pressed against mine, and it was hard to keep my mind on other things.

Next, I loaded a biology stick, and went right to the speculative stuff at the end, where the authors were guessing about what aliens would be like.

"I think I have to read the first part to understand this," Krin sighed. "What's convergent evolution?"

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"That's the idea that similar environmental problems evolve similar *solutions*. Like kangaroos and deer, or bats and owls. Some people think it applies to cultural development, too, and aliens will be a lot like us. Others say no, they'll be too weird to even talk to."

"If they're *that* weird," Krin asked, "why would they want to talk to *us*, or visit us?"

"Good question. Uh, I just remembered I've got to recycle the fax paper." Mom used a lot of hard copy in her engineering business; it was a lot less expensive than having dozens of cyberbooks for things she wanted to have in front of her all the time. One of my chores was to gather up all the used paper and stick it in the recycler to be laser bleached and used again.

I got a sharp look from Mom as I put a stack in the almost-empty hopper just in time. Mom had ordered all sorts of stuff about magnetic sails and neutral particle-beam focusing, and it was coming in about as fast as I could keep filling the hopper. She had diagrams pasted up all over the walls of the study. In fact, it was clear that we were going to need more paper, so we started organizing a trip into town.

Then, in the stuff they sent Mom, we got our first look at the Korkol. A diagram of a Korkol spacesuit had somehow slipped through. In fact, that was how we realized that data were definitely being censored. Dad was phlegmatic as usual, but Mom and Dr. Ritter were furious.

One look, and it was obvious why the Korkol came to Mars rather than Earth; we've got a third the gravity and almost twice the atmospheric pressure. If you're a Korkol, that makes it a lot easier to fly. To me, they looked a bit like a cross between a frog and a crow, but that makes them sound ugly. They weren't. They looked *right*, somehow.

I went to get Krin to show her, and asked her if she wanted to go to Viking City for paper and blank data rods with us. She didn't answer right away, playing with the fish ring on her hand. "I probably should," she finally said, sighed, gave me a little hug, and kissed my cheek. "I've got to get some stuff and talk to Dad." My heart was beating so loud from the kiss that I was sure that everyone in the house could hear it, but I held together, somehow.

Meanwhile, Mom had started the interview using the main screen in the living room instead of the study, because the background in the study was too messy. She'd even put on a businesslike jump suit. Krin and I walked right behind her, still in our beach towels, not realizing we were live across the whole planet; Mom had put the comm unit on the coffee table to get her living room view in the background. Dad kind of cracked up and motioned us to the side, out of the field of view, and we stopped to listen to the interview.

The newspeople were trying to get Mom to say that the Korkol had

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some dangerous new sort of physics. Mom wasn't sure of that and wouldn't give them a supporting quote. It was all very polite, but afterward, when we saw the edited broadcast, it looked like Mom was warning about alien technology, too. She wasn't amused, and went to make some calls.

Krin and her father went to the guest house and I went out to get the buzzer ready, jealous again of the time away from Krin. I hooked up the power line to the spinner and torqued up my buckyballs. A fluorinated buckyball spinning at a hundred teraradians per second packs five times as much energy as rocket fuel in one tenth the volume—you can fly around Mars all day on that.

But if people like the New Reformationists had been in charge three centuries back when that was discovered, well, it wouldn't have *been* discovered. At least that's how I saw it. I felt rotten seeing Krin go over to them. She was too smart. But there was nothing I could do. Zero. She'd made up her mind, and I'd just have to stop dreaming about her. Sure.

Dr. Ritter and Krin came out, bags packed, while I was doing a preflight fan check. I hadn't realized that Krin was leaving too, and that in that tender moment in the room, she'd been saying goodbye. She was back in her New Reformation shirt, now. I just paid very close attention to the spinner and the inspection plates. Dad says I'm fussy, but my license is less than a year old.

While I monitored the spin-up, Dr. Ritter explained that there was a problem with the New Reformation diocese brass holding back information about the aliens, and that he was going to try to help negotiate. Krin's old man has a gift for understatement; the Church of the New Reformation was pulling out all the political power stops to keep a lid on things. It seemed that on top of the inconvenience of their existence, the aliens' religion was founded on natural law, and had no place in it for supernatural beings.

"Just because they're aliens doesn't make them *right*," Krin protested. "Is that all?"

"Their life cycle is patently obscene, by New Reformation standards," he said with an ironic grin. "That isn't surprising, though; by those same standards, so is ours."

Krin didn't like this comment very much, and I could sense things weren't going well. I hoped.

I asked if they'd be coming back again next summer, and that's when I found out that in the New Reformation, you were expected to marry early and start having babies, right through school.

"That's too soon!" I heard myself say.

Dr. Ritter grimaced. "Perhaps, but it makes economic sense, given the

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New Reformation's extended family support system and their deliberately limited requirements for formal education." He shook his head. "Schoolwork isn't easy, but, really, most of it can be done at home. By the time the young parents are ready to be economically independent, the first kids are old enough to babysit the youngest ones."

I was surprised to hear him say anything nice about the New Reformation, but as a sociologist, I guess he had to be objective. Krin wasn't. She was enthusiastic.

"We'll have a couple of kids, our own house, and our own land when most kids are still wrapped up in football and beer busts," Krin claimed. "It's a more natural, organic lifestyle. I'll be free of all the stresses of conforming to the artificial needs of modern civilization."

"The New Reformation lifestyle has stresses of its *own*," her father warned, "particularly in the conformity area. What's the purpose of living the way they do, just repeating the same cycle, generation after generation? Where are they going?"

"They're content just to follow God's plan," she countered. "It's the process that counts, and it feels right to *me*." It was clear they'd had this argument before, and neither gave in.

What, I thought as I topped off the charge, was wrong with *me?* I'd be perfectly willing to make babies with Krin, if that's what she wanted. I was sure my folks would be happy to put us up for a while; we could do all the farming you could ever want to do on our land, and had the robots to do it with. She wouldn't have to pretend to swallow any of the New Reformationist garbage, like the stuff that bishop whoever was putting out about the aliens (I found out later that the bishop's name was Kelso, too). But Krin was smart, determined, and way over my head, so, as usual, I didn't say anything.

The tone indicating full charge sounded so I stowed the spinner and its leads and pronounced us ready. We got in the buzzer and took off. I had it do a pass over our place before heading to the Viking City shuttle port. Dad and Mrs. Ritter waved, Mom was busy. I had the buzzer record everything, so I could send Krin the cube. It's pretty impressive: the domed house on the bluff overlooking both the lake and the bay at the point of a green wedge of irrigated fields and forest stretching almost twenty kilometers north, to the Shalbatana valley.

Viking City was sited a couple of hundred kilometers up the Shalbatana back before anyone was sure about where the Chryse Sea shoreline would stabilize. It was almost a kilometer higher than we were; they had wanted to be sure it would stay high and dry. Also, it was a little cooler up there, though not much. Altitude makes a lot more difference on a high-gravity planet like Earth.

I took us down to the Shalbatana through the red fluted gorge of

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LeRenard River. That's us, the LeRenards. When you're at the ground floor, like great-grandfather, your name gets on things. Our family goes back to old Mars, third colony ship, before there was any New Reformation and "Saint" Thomas Solacus was still a mechanic. Then I turned west, upriver, and we watched the rapids and forests go by below.

We listened for news of the aliens, but heard nothing new. Dr. Ritter voiced his concerns.

"Some New Reformationists want the Korkol to go away so that they can pretend that the whole thing was a hoax. They have the votes to influence politics to the extent that information about the aliens is being voluntarily censored at the bishops' request, to give them time to invent a new party line."

Krin thought that this was just a fringe element. She was sure Ed and his folks weren't like that at all. Yes, they had all the romantic reserve, quaint manners, and politeness of their sect's reputation; but they used robots too, and Ed was getting a Marsport Prep education. She said she could believe in God in a Deist, metaphysical way, just ignore their theology, and get along fine.

Dr. Ritter disagreed. He thought there were a lot of people who like to be told what to think, and that the New Reformationists were breeding and training people like that as fast as they could.

Time goes quickly when you're discussing subjects like that. Before I knew it, or could figure out how to say goodbye, the buzzer linked and flowed into the traffic pattern at West Viking City Field. As we came down, Krin recognized Ed and a couple of his friends on the fringe of the grass, waiting for us; at least they were the only ones wearing New Reformation shirts in the thirty-five Celsius midday heat. He was a big redhead, about thirteen or so, a couple of meters tall, and looked used to using his hands. I was pretty sure I didn't want to find out if he was the jealous type or not.

Krin was surprised and excited that Ed was there, and she jumped out of the buzzer as soon as the fans stopped and the doors unlocked. No goodbyes. Dr. Ritter looked at me and shrugged; I guess what I was feeling was pretty obvious to everybody but Krin. She ran up to Ed, arms open and a look of unmitigated joy on her face. He didn't react to her until she was right up to him.

And then, with a powerful blow from the back of his hand to her face, he knocked her flat to the ground. Dr. Ritter was out of the buzzer pretty fast, for an old guy, but I got there first and jumped on Ed Kelso, pulling him to the ground. Something very hard hit me in the back and head.

That was the last thing I remember until waking up on a cot in the Viking City jail. Well, they called it a public safety facility, but I couldn't walk out. Dad had to come to get me. He said Krin had pleaded with Ed

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and his family not to press charges against her father and me, and she left with them on that condition, bruised and sobbing.

Dr. Ritter wasn't in much better shape than I was, but he'd gone on up the tethertube to Deimos despite his injuries an hour ago. He said he was motivated to do whatever he could to make the New Reformationists uncomfortable. When we got home, Mom was tight-lipped and Mrs. Ritter was all over me, crying. I almost wished I'd stayed in jail, I was so embarrassed.

When everyone settled down, they told me what happened. When Krin and I had walked through Mom's interview, all Mars had seen us before the New Reformation censors realized that Krin was a girl. Ed Kelso had gone ballistic because she hadn't kept covered up like he told her to. That was my fault, only Mrs. Ritter didn't seem to blame me at all. She was just very unhappy and very concerned. We couldn't even contact Krin by phone.

Mom wasn't mad at me either, but she was as angry as I've ever seen her about a lot of other things. When she gets that look, *something* usually happens. Dad was in his "Ellie, let's think this out before we do anything stupid" mode.

The public news had dried up to hourly bulletins. We were getting one to the effect that there was nothing new about the "alleged" alien spacecraft when Dr. Ritter called from Deimos. It seemed that the New Reformation bishops had just about persuaded the Korkol that their presence would be very unsettling to the established social order, and that the civilized thing to do would be to withdraw.

"The Aliens aren't idiots," he fumed. "They waited for years in the inner comet belt, learning our language and analyzing. But we can't get through to them. Our Martian Planetary President isn't part of the New Reformation, but he needs their votes in a close contest, and he's caved in. Everything has to go through a cultural affairs bureaucrat sympathetic to the New Reformation, and it's apparent that the only thing that's going out to the president and the Korkol is stuff that tends to support the New Reformation culture-shock ideology. I've got to get back now, Ellie, maybe you can get through this log jam." We said goodbye and he signed off.

"Mom," I said. "Why don't we just talk to the aliens directly, ourselves?"

"The contact committee won't put us through. They're censoring everything."

"We've got our own dish. Maybe the aliens have already figured out our communications system. That's what we'd do if we came into an inhabited solar system."

"Well, yes. But the starship's at Phobos."

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"I can rig up a sight and steer the antenna manually as Phobos goes by."

Mom looked at me for a long while. "We could get into trouble, even if it works. But I think I'm willing to risk it. How about you?" She looked at Dad. He shut his eyes for a little, then nodded without saying anything. The Viking County government could take everything that my family had accumulated in four generations away from us, if it got mad enough. And it was dominated by New Reformationists. Dad was literally betting the farm with that nod, though I didn't realize much of this until I was a lot older.

"You'd better go to it. Phobos is already past zenith."

I grabbed the sonodrill, liquid clamp, a solar cell with a test light, a multi wrench, and some molding, and then headed for the roof. I drilled a small hole in the back of the dish, and used the liquid clamp to glue a stick onto the subreflector support at about the same azimuth as the hole. I glued the solar cell to the subreflector and ran the test bulb wires to the back of the dish. After releasing the azimuth and elevation lock bolts, I manually swung it over toward the setting sun.

The dish is white and concentrates sunlight just like microwaves, though not as efficiently. The solar cell would be at maximum output when the dish's rough image of the sun fell on the center of the subreflector, which would happen when the antenna was pointed at the sun, so I moved the dish around until I got a maximum, then peeked through the hole I'd drilled to see where the sun was along the stick. I put a hole in the piece of wood there, then double checked to make sure the holes lined up on the sun while the solar cell output was maximum. They did, close enough. I beat the sunset by about five minutes.

I knocked on the skylight and gave Dad a thumbs up to let him know I was ready. Then I sighted the antenna on Phobos, and started tracking. Dad came out to say that we'd established contact and stayed to spell me for a while. We alternated for almost half an hour, until Phobos set.

When we got back in, Mom told us that she had gotten through to the Chief Engineer of the alien starship. The Korkol had all learned passable English during their long trip in from the outskirts of the solar system, and when the Korkol engineers found out about the problems Mom was having with censorship, they had been very cooperative.

"We're learning a lot from each other," she said, with a smile. "They're getting a little tired of the politics, too, and they're going to move up to Deimos, right in the face of church objections."

Good for them, I thought, preoccupied with misery now that the task was over. If the Korkol hadn't come, we'd never have made the trip to Marsport, and Krin would still be here. I went outside to walk some of

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the blues away. Just that morning, my arms and head didn't ache, there were no aliens, and I had gone swimming with Krin.

I found Mrs. Ritter out there, on the grass at the edge of the bluff overlooking the sea, her straight golden hair streaming down her back to those baggy, pockety walking shorts she always wore. She was staring at the still-sunlit line of the Deimos-Tharsis tethertube just over the horizon. At the end was a point of light, Deimos, and another, fainter one moving toward it. The starship, already? Her husband was up there now, with the contact committee.

She greeted me with a smile and motioned for me to sit next to her. "The tube curves up like that, to miss Phobos, I know," she waved her arms at the tethertube. "But you'd think the end would have to be at the equator. How can it do that?"

I could answer that one, pulling myself out of self-pity for a bit. "Imagine yourself at the north pole. Okay?" She nodded. "Now you've got a bucket with a very long rope. Swing it around your head so it doesn't hit the ice." She laughed and pretended to shiver.

"Now, just keep letting the rope out."

"Oh! I think I understand now." She paused, reflecting, then added: "There's a way around every impossible-seeming thing if you think carefully enough, isn't there?

"Well, sometimes," I answered.

"Your mother is so good at that, and I can see that she's taught you very well."

Maybe it was because she was so unthreatening, so simple in the best sense of the word, that I could tell her what I couldn't say to Krin, to Dad, to Dr. Ritter, and certainly not to Mom.

"Uh, Mrs. Ritter, I think I love Krin," I blurted. "I don't know what to do about it. Looks hopeless."

She just put an arm around me and held me as we sat there while the shadow of Mars crept up the shining strand of the tethertube and eclipsed both the moon and the starship.

Then I thought of something I could do. It wouldn't get Krin back, but at least it would hurt the New Reformationists, and maybe it would help Dr. Ritter. I had left the buzzer's cameras on when we landed at Viking City; everything that had happened that noon had been recorded. If all Mars and the aliens could see what had happened . . .

I told Mrs. Ritter, and her eyes lit up. "I've got an old boyfriend in the news department of one of the independent commercial networks. Maybe he could use a scoop." We got busy.

The news people put it all together: Mom's interview, the fight at the landing field, the phony charges, and Krin trading her own freedom for her father's and mine. They didn't have to say anything about New

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Reformationist intolerance and censorship: they just showed it, along with our faxes of the Korkol. The public network news people stuck their necks out and ran the story too.

What a commotion that caused! Preempted programs, angry editorials, clogged comm channels, and my family right in the middle of it. Mars could still be outraged, and, as the reaction hit, the president quickly dropped his effort to appease the New Reformation bishops with censorship.

Dr. Ritter called from Deimos; the aliens had arrived, and all efforts to manage the contact on the basis of culture shock had been dropped: what was, *was*, and people would just have to adapt. He asked if we'd mind playing host to some colleagues. Mom was enthusiastic, despite how late it was getting, and Dad went to pick him up at Viking City field two hours later.

After getting the true, confirmed story, the Home Planet reacted too. A fleet of politicians, bureaucrats, and newships set out from Earth, despite its unfavorable orbital position.

The New Reformationists beat the drums of technophobia, but by then Mom was ready with a full explanation of the Korkol propulsion system: their pusher beams weren't as narrow as ours, so they simply used shielding and a bigger target. There was another part of their starship which they hadn't brought into the inner solar system with them; their magnetic sail, a thin gossamer spider web of superconducting cables many kilometers across, was still orbiting in the inner comet belt. No FTL warp drive or anything like that.

Their slowdown system was ingenious, however. They put mirrors at the nodes of the magsail, forming an array which could focus a high-powered laser across several astronomical units. They used that setup to vaporize and ionize bits of comet which lay in their path, and then ran into the resulting ionized gas with the magsail, which would then act like a parachute.

Diverting slightly from comet to comet, they'd bumped along through the Oort belt to a stop well outside Persephone's orbit. No magic, no new physics, not even any really new technological *capabilities*; just superlatively clever application. Mom was in seventh heaven—seeming more happy than the situation warranted, at least from my perspective.

I felt she was acting as if Krin didn't matter. All *I* could think of was Krin, who loved freedom, being ordered around, bred, and beaten in some New Reformationist hellhole. And yes, I was a little jealous about the breeding part.

Late that night, Dad and Dr. Ritter arrived alone. I asked about his guests, and he said they had to pick someone up in the Valles and would be by a little later. Mom looked tense.

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Cold currents from the Boreal Ocean well up just beyond our bay, bringing cool breezes after midnight off the Chryse Sea. We all went outside to the lanai as the air finally cooled off; nightgulls coasted overhead, crying, as if they too felt my loss. We leaned on the rail and gazed at the Southern Cross floating over the still bay, wondering who besides the Korkol might be out there.

"Well, there will be a lot of fish," Dad remarked, his thoughts always nearer to home. "There's talk of allowing fishing on the bay in a couple of years. We could be running tour boats or fishing boats from here." He had to raise his voice over the sound of the nightgulls' flapping wings.

That seemed strange. Nightgulls don't flap much; they soar. I looked up.

He appeared suddenly, coming out of the star-studded black, invisible until some stray light from inside the house caught him: a large winged being, holding some sort of weapon in his hands. He swooped down from overhead and lit on the rail in front of Mother so that his head would be even with Mom's. She greeted him as a friend, not seeming at all surprised by the Korkol Chief Engineer's visit. I just stood there, awe-struck.

But the flapping noises continued, and I looked around in surprise. Then, off the front of the lanai, I saw four more Korkol come into the light, carrying something suspended between them. They came lower, and then I could see a person sitting on the sling, wearing a tattered long white robe, a black eye, and a big grin. As they set her gently down on the lanai, everyone called Krin's name. But she rushed to *me*. Mom grinned and winked. I should have known.

I think the Korkol said something to Mom about civilized beings having to stick together, but I didn't catch it at all. I was much too busy with Krin.

And so, I missed the beginnings of the compact between Human and Korkol, which has saved, in my judgment, at least part of humanity from a growing new dark age.

In later years, I would write at length (Length? Nowadays they call us the Martian Durants!) about my planet's history and the convergent evolution of space-faring cultures. Even back then, it was pretty clear to me that our free-thinking families had more in common with the free-flying Korkol star travelers than we would ever have with the New Reformationists. A division of sorts is occurring, one that has less to do with biological nature than with intellectual heritage and the space-faring environment. Some will be able to go on, some will not.

The Korkol stayed with us that night, and for several nights thereafter, talking with Mom and Dr. Ritter. When they took a break, Krin and I would show the Korkol where they could find fish, and they delighted in stooping from the sky and catching the fish in their feet. The Korkol

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talked to each other as they swooped and dove, in a high-pitched, burbly sort of sound, and they always let the fish go.

Krin and I were married the next year, thanks in ironical part to an early-marriage law the New Reformationists managed to push through. We were not economically independent, but, with the loving support of both families, we continued our lives and grew together. We built a small house with our own hands, on the shores of Chryse Sea, and helped supplement my writing income by running Father's tourist boats around the bay.

Our children's children live in that house now. When Father passed on, we moved up to the old residence. There, on warm tropical nights we can take our canes, walk out on the lanai, and hold hands as we look up to the stars. There, on the very spot it happened so many years ago, we can remember that magical night when my princess was borne down from the sky to me on the wings of angels. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 110)

formed Mars; acclaimed new writer **Maureen F. McHugh,** whose novel *China Mountain Zhang* was on both the Hugo and Nebula ballots last year, takes us to a fascinating but disturbing future society for a hard-eyed and compelling look at the price of freedom, in the brilliant "Nekropolis"; Nebula- and World Fantasy Award-winner **Pat Murphy** gives us a sly and tricky look at some "Games of Deception"; recent Nebula-winner **Michael Swanwick,** one of our most popular writers, returns with an intricately crafted and cunning little postmodern fable of *mores* and manners, "The Mask"; new writer **Kandis Elliot** takes us to "Cretaceous Park," for one of the most harrowing—and ingenious—fictional rides you're ever likely to experience; the madly inventive **Phillip C. Jennings** takes us back to the nineteenth century for a tale that is, well, madly inventive, as well as richly compassionate and quite fascinating, in "Original Sin"; and Gonzo King **Don Webb** returns with a vision that is bizarre even for *him,* as he gives us ringside seats for the unforgettable sight of "The Sabbath of the Zeppelins." PLUS—and it's amazing that we can squeeze anything else *in*—an array of columns and features!

Look for our very special April issue on sale on your newsstands on March 1, 1994, or subscribe today and miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in months to come!

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CROSSING OVER

You and I
lie side by side
intertwined
like chromosomes
overlapping for a time
trading little bits
of ourselves
before we pull apart
into our separate worlds
our private cells.

—Karawynn Long

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This multi-talented author is both a musician and an applied mathematician. Dr. Marcus plays the saxophone and the acoustic guitar, and he has sung with the Oakland Symphony Chorus, the Oakland Opera Chorus, and numerous rock bands. In addition, and in collaboration with a physicist and a neurophysiologist, he is founding a new scientific journal. *Reconstructing Science* will address interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and controversial issues in science, technology, policy, and science education.

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Claude Wilczek guides the old Caddy past the empty storefronts and abandoned warehouses of downtown New Haven. The buildings rise up in front of him like the undersea temples of a decrepit, post-industrial Atlantis. Moonlight glints off jagged tips of glass in the brooding windows. He takes a left on Division Street, heading toward the bus station. Toward the women.

There are three of them, equally spaced down the length of the block. They lean against lampposts and parked cars, in postures of casual allure. He slows down as he approaches the first. Her skin is dark as bittersweet chocolate, smooth and shiny in the light from the streetlamp. She is wearing a red vinyl jacket open almost to her navel, fishnet stockings, short, black skirt. Small gold hoops pierce her left nostril and eyebrow.

A look is exchanged, a nod. He stops the car and reaches over to open the passenger door.

"You want to party?" she asks.

Claude nods nervously.

"Twenty I suck your cock."

He nods again and she gets in the car.

"The money."

Claude reaches into his shirt and hands her a crumpled bill.

They drive back down Division Street, away from the bus station, and park behind an abandoned factory. She reaches over, unzips his pants, and goes down on him. He feels the warmth spreading out from his groin and his hips begin to move.

"Yeah, baby," she says unconvincingly, pausing for a moment. She looks up at Claude. The rings through her nose and eyebrow glitter in the dark. She engulfs him again.

Claude closes his eyes and the images wheel through him. His second wife, her face flushed with desire, half in moonshadow. His lover going down on him, her blonde hair falling over her face. His father, rough-cheek perfume of tobacco and vodka. Budapest, rain-slicked cobbled street, smell of sausages grilling on a sidewalk cart, Soviet tanks rumbling past the Government Palace.

"Oh, yeah, give it to me, baby," she says, managing to sound breathy and listless at the same time.

He opens his eyes. There is a woman standing under a streetlamp twenty feet away, facing him. She is wearing a long overcoat and her blonde hair falls limply on her shoulders. Her face is hidden in shadow, but her stance, the shape of her, resonates someplace deep inside him. Full recognition skips back just out of reach, though flickering behind the pleasure coursing up from the center of him.

He ducks down in the seat, hoping she will not see him. His orgasm

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surges through him and he cries out in Hungarian, clutching the steering wheel.

When he opens his eyes again, the woman is gone.

As he is driving home, WCLA is playing Kodaly, the cello sonata. The music moves from sharp, staccato passages, the notes bitten off like broken sticks, to deep, seductive long tones, and it seems to draw the Caddy out of the crumbling downtown sprawl.

Claude feels the shame begin in a quiet place within him and work its way outward. It is almost pre-verbal, a dark, formless shape in his mind. He knows the feeling well, and knows how to wall it off so that he can sip its exquisite bitterness in small doses.

He turns onto a tree-lined street and pulls into his driveway. As he walks up the path to his front door, he hears his daughter's footsteps pounding down the stairs.

He opens the door and she throws herself at his legs, giggling.

"Daddy, Daddy!"

He reaches down and strokes her thin, straight hair. She looks up, a dull, happy light in her too-close eyes. One of them veers wildly off to the left and the other looks straight at him. She is smiling, and it seems to push her features even closer together, accentuating the Down Syndrome signature.

"Daddy!" she says again, with a slight, muffled slur.

He leans down and kisses the top of her head.

"Hello, Zoe. Hello, baby."

He feels a wave of fierce love wash over him and he buries his face in her hair. She is so pure, he thinks. The only pure thing in my life.

His lover, Mary, is standing in the hallway, her hand on her hip, a sardonic half-smile on her face that could go either way.

He gently untangles his daughter's arms from his legs and he walks over to her.

"And you," he says. "Hello to you."

He leans over to kiss her and she turns her head so that his lips just brush against her cheek.

"We were going to try to catch the Yale Symphony's dress rehearsal tonight. Did you forget?" She steps back. "I really wanted to hear what they did to the Brahms. Callie came over from next door to babysit but I sent her home."

Claude smacks himself on the forehead. "Shit! Shit! I'm very sorry." He really had forgotten. "I was preparing Fourier analysis lecture. Classes—"

"—start tomorrow," she finishes for him. "Yes, yes, I know. I've hardly seen you at all for the last two weeks."

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"I am sorry, baby. I am space cadet."

This time, she leans toward him and kisses him on the mouth. "This is what I get for living with a mathematician. Wait until opera season opens, though. Between my rehearsals and your lectures we'll hardly recognize each other come Christmas."

He awakens in the middle of the night. Mary's sleeping form is curled beside him in a fetal apostrophe. He puts on a robe and pads softly downstairs, careful so as not to awaken his daughter. He sits down at the table next to the hall phone and dials his sister's number from memory. The phone at the other end rings six, seven, eight times. Finally, a sleepy voice answers.

"Hello?"

Like Claude's, Alya's accent is still very thick. Frozen, he thinks. We are frozen in time like bugs in amber. The familiar voice seems to echo in his ears over the oceanic hiss of the long distance connection. Ghost conversations weave in and out of the susurrus, faint and fragmentary.

"Hello?" she says again. "Who is this?"

Claude holds the receiver to his chest. The moonlight coming in through the living room window throws a geometric pattern of light and shadow across the hall carpet. He has not spoken with his sister for over ten years.

"Hello?"

There is a muffled curse and a sharp click.

Passing through the gates of the Yale campus is like entering a medieval keep—crumbling tenements outside, academic stone and ivy inside. Claude has a headache, and a vague feeling of incipient depression. He remembers dreaming vividly the previous night, but no details. As he pulls into his parking space behind Courant Hall, the encounter with the prostitute comes flooding back to him. Her flat, dull monotone as she snatches a breath of air. *Yeah, baby. Give it to me, baby.* Her head bobbing up and down in his lap, the rough, even texture of the corn rows in her hair. He is getting an erection, and a hot flush creeps up his cheeks. He looks at himself in the rear view mirror, feels a rush of loathing at the delicate features—pale skin stretched tight across slight, feminine curves of bone, fine tracery of blue veins just visible beneath the surface.

Claude has never lacked for attention from women, though. Forty-four years old and he has been married three times. The first two were dancers, the third an opera singer. All three marriages blossomed and collapsed in the same pattern—two or three years of numb bliss, a sudden pulling away, a volley of joyless infidelities. And always the prostitutes.

His daughter, Zoe, is the product of his second marriage. Her mother

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moved to L.A. four years ago and sank like a stone. No letters, no postcards, nothing. She blamed him for Zoe's condition, but he knew there was no blaming. It was dumb luck—like winning the lottery or choking to death on a bit of gristle. He has been told that he is fortunate, though; that Zoe is "high-functioning."

It's different with Mary, he thinks. They met while he was still married to Nedda, the opera singer. He used to come to rehearsals at the big, old hall in Bridgeport and sit in the back. Mary was a cellist in the orchestra and sat with him one afternoon when the director was putting the chorus through its paces for a production of *Boris Gudonov*. Together they ate the ham sandwiches Nedda had made for his lunch and sipped hot tea from his thermos. The first thing he noticed was her hands. They were large and strong, with long, supple fingers. The hands of a cellist.

Claude takes a last look in the mirror and mentally strokes his shame again, like a small animal cupped trembling in his hand. He puts his glasses on. The frames are small and round and gold, the lenses clear, unground glass. As he walks through the vaulted entrance to Courant Hall, the familiar smells fill him—ivy and stone, wet from the morning rain.

He walks up the stairs to the third floor and steps into the Mathematics Department office to check his mail. He almost collides with Tom Magdar. Magdar is a burly Englishman who specializes in differential geometry. He towers over Claude, and has the coarse, scrubbed look of someone who revels in outdoor activities. Claude was on his tenure committee last year and held out with the only dissenting vote until finally succumbing to pressure from the other committee members.

"Claude, how are you?" Magdar claps him on the shoulder.

Claude forces a smile. "Fine, fine. Getting ready for another semester." He looks past Magdar at the doorway into the hall. Magdar stands there like a tree, an expression of stupid good cheer on his face.

"What are you teaching this semester?" he asks.

"Modern analysis. Light load." He puts his hand on Magdar's shoulder and pushes him aside. "Excuse me. Lecture to prepare."

"Right-o. Good man." He claps Claude on the shoulder again as he passes.

As Claude nears his office he realizes his fists are clenched into tight balls. *Two-faced swine.* He has heard, in confidence of course, that Magdar knows about his efforts to block tenure. Since then, Magdar has played "hail fellow, well met" to the hilt, but Claude senses a mocking tone beneath the effusion. He emerges from their interactions with the feeling that he has failed at some subtle jockeying for power.

In his office, the message light is on and he plays back the calls. His student Lee Ming, in a mild panic about a particularly sticky bit of

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analysis. Harvey, the department chairman, about the faculty parking committee. Then several clicks, a long, whispering hiss. Music, very faint. A woman's voice, speaking in Hungarian.

"Hello? Claude? Hello?" The crackle and static is cut off abruptly. There are several clicks, then a dial tone.

Claude feels a cold knot in his stomach, as if he had just swallowed a glass of ice water. At first he thinks it is his sister, but no. He *knows* that voice, though. Suddenly, his office feels impossibly close to him. The faint, dusty musk of the mathematics books lining the shelves hangs in the air like a fetid mist. He staggers over to the window, opens it, breathes deeply.

He is standing in front of the classroom. Before him are rows of faces, some eager and open, some jaded and full of the arrogance of the gifted young. There are about thirty students, a lot for a first year graduate seminar. His reputation has preceded him—Claude is a good teacher. He slides into his lecture persona easily, like a loose-fitting suit. There are the inevitable questions about what will be expected for the exams, how much homework "counts," how he curves his grades.

"Grading policy is simple," he says. "If you argue with me, you get 'A.' If you don't, you get 'B.' "

A polite chuckle ripples through the classroom. Claude lifts an admonishing finger.

"I am quite serious. That you have come this far shows you have rudimentary mathematical ability. But this is real thing." He lifts up the Korber text. Actually, he isn't very fond of the Korber—too chatty and informal. Good mathematics shouldn't read like a cheap detective novel. But Harvey had been adamant. Claude suspected he was getting kickbacks from the publisher. "Part of your training as mathematicians now is to learn to ask questions, to develop critical habits of thinking." He looks around the room. "Any questions?"

Another chorus of chuckles.

"I didn't think so. Let us begin. We review your entire undergraduate analysis course in the next three lectures. We do it right this time. Purpose is to establish lexicon for functional analysis."

He launches into a discussion of elementary point set topology. Sets, open and closed; neighborhoods; vector spaces. He sketches out a proof of the Bolzano-Weierstrass theorem at the blackboard, turns around to face the class, and sees a woman sitting alone in the back row. He didn't hear her come in. She is wearing a long coat of cheap wool, the narrow lapels looking old-fashioned and out of place. She has straight, blonde hair parted at the side, and it hangs limply down to her shoulders. She

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has a strange detached expression on her face, as though she is unaware of her surroundings.

Budapest. The summer heat lying heavily over the city, radiating back in ripples over the cobbled streets. Her face framed by an open window, sun catching gold highlights in her hair. *Mother.* It was the last time he saw her, that August in 1956 when the Soviet tanks rolled through. But it is a young woman sitting there in front of him. *Impossible.* And last night, the woman standing there half in shadow, the prostitute's head bobbing up and down in his lap, his back arching, hips thrusting.

Her.

Claude drops the chalk and staggers back against the blackboard. A swell of whispers rises up from the class. "Excuse me—" he mutters, and lurches toward the door.

In the hallway outside the classroom, he leans against the wall, breathing in short gasps. *Mother. It isn't possible.* Gradually, his breathing slows. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes the sweat from his forehead. He takes a deep breath, lets it out, and walks back into the classroom. The white-noise murmur of conversation stops abruptly. The back row is empty.

Claude sits in the cool darkness and oiled mahogany smell of the Faculty Club. He has a glass of chablis in front of him, barely touched although he has been there for an hour. He is looking through a many-paneled window with a curved Gothic frame at a quadrangle of grass bordered by shady cedars.

For someone who is having a mental breakdown, he thinks, I am doing pretty well. He takes another sip of chablis. His mouth puckers with the sourness of the wine and he thinks of his father. Dedicated alcoholic. Professor of economics at university. He rarely thinks of him. Tries very hard not to think of him.

He cannot summon up a picture of his parents together—he remembers them as voices raised in anger from another room, remembers the fear he felt huddling with his sister under a scratchy blanket as his father beat his mother, remembers the sound of her crying, as if the sobs were being torn out of her. When his father used a belt, the blows were sharp, loud cracks; when he used his hands, the impacts were low and meaty. Claude thought that she was taking the blows for him and Alya, that nothing stood between them and their father's rage but their mother's wispy presence.

She disappeared during the Soviet invasion in 1956. There was no note, no call from the authorities to come identify a body in a basement morgue. She just stepped out to market one day and never returned. The

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sense of betrayal Claude felt was absolute. How could she leave them? How could she?

After Claude's mother disappeared, after the tanks rolled through Budapest, it was as if something in himself had been flattened by their relentless progress. The focus of his world narrowed down until it encompassed nothing but the daily business of survival under the new regime—the lines, the black market, avoiding the watchful eyes of the police who were suddenly everywhere.

His father, too, changed. He still beat Claude and Alya, but intermittently and without relish. Mostly he sat in the kitchen with his vodka bottle, clattering away on the old typewriter, chain-smoking foul smelling cigarettes smuggled in from Turkey. He had connections in the right-wing intelligentsia, and managed to arrange an escape to the West for all of them. It was not an uncommon thing in those days. But he could not secure an academic position in the States, and drank himself to death. Claude and Alya dropped out of touch shortly thereafter—it was as if each reminded the other that they shared a secret too raw to acknowledge.

Claude tries to imagine a Budapest without the secret police, a Budapest without the heavy pall of deprivation and hopelessness hanging over the city, thicker than the smoke from state iron works. He cannot. He just cannot get his mind around it. It is as if the stories of hope and new opportunity he reads in the paper are of some other place, some Avalon he has never seen.

By the time he leaves campus, it is dark. Before going home, Claude drives into the crumbling ruins clustered around the bus station. He drives past the women, goes around the block, and drives past them again. His prostitute is there. She looks at him each time as he passes by, but shows no recognition. The rings in her nose and eyebrow flash gold in the light from the street lamp.

Mary is at a rehearsal and Callie is babysitting for Zoe. Callie is the daughter of a literature professor at Yale, fifteen years old and very pretty in spite of a fluorescent pink Mohawk and a constellation of acne on her cheeks and forehead. She wears a wicked-looking cluster of cuffs and hoops all up the curve of her right ear, and Claude has never seen her in anything except black jeans and T-shirt. She is very good with Zoe.

"How is she?" he asks, taking off his jacket and setting his briefcase down next to the hall table.

"Quiet, man. Really quiet. She's been hanging with the toad." She nods her head in the direction of the living room. Her earrings jangle faintly.

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Claude looks past her. Zoe is sprawled asleep on the couch, her arms wrapped around a stuffed toad the size of a large cat that he gave her for Christmas the year before. The toad is wearing a short vest and an expression of comic seriousness. Its arms are opened wide, as if asking for a hug.

Claude picks her up and carries her to her room. He tucks her into bed and nestles the toad in the crook of her elbow. He bends down, kisses her gently on the forehead, and steps back, looking down at her. He stands there for a long time. Cars pass on the street outside and shadows from their headlights crawl across the room at irregular intervals. It scares him how much he loves her. His high-functioning daughter. Finally he sighs, turns around, and walks out of the room, leaving the door open a crack behind him.

There are no apparitions that evening. Mary calls to tell him that rehearsal has been extended, that she will be home late and he shouldn't wait up. Claude feels something like sorrow surge through him and recede, like a wave coursing through a rocky channel.

Claude is dreaming of his father's incest with his sister. He hears her cries in the bed next to his, hears his father's heavy breathing and muffled curses, senses the weight of that huge presence in the dark, like something undersea. Then, suddenly, he is in the shower, warm water beating against his back. His father is with him, rubbing the rough scratchy soap down his arms, up his legs, between his thighs. On his knees, leaning over him, brushing his lips against his face, his neck. Rough-cheek perfume of tobacco and vodka, scratchy abrasion trailing down his chest, down his stomach. He wants to run away, but he cannot. He feels torn open, flayed, a pulling at the very center of him, pulling something out of him in long, ropy streamers.

He awakens in the middle of the night. Mary is next to him, sleeping. Her breathing sounds very loud in the still darkness. He slides carefully out of bed. She snorts, groans quietly, and rolls over. He has a blinding headache. He knows he has been dreaming, but does not remember the details. A crystal doorknob. Running water. Steam.

He walks down the steps to the hall phone, dials the number.

"Hello?"

He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come.

"Hello?"

An hour before class, he realizes that he has forgotten his lecture notes. If he runs a red light or two, he can just make the round trip in time.

As soon as he walks in the door, he knows that something is wrong. He *knows*. Zoe runs up to greet him, dragging the toad behind her by

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one of its webbed feet. He picks her up in his arms and walks into the hall. The feeling of dread intensifies.

"Mary?" he calls. He hears faint sounds coming from the upstairs bedroom. He puts Zoe down. "Go into living room, baby. I will be right there."

He walks up the stairs and the sounds resolve into the rhythmic squeaking of bedsprings and low, throaty moans that he recognizes too well. He pushes the door open, knowing what he will see.

Mary is crouched on the bed in the darkened room, her naked back to him, her hips rocking up and down. All he can see of the other man is legs and hands, and his cock pumping rhythmically into her. Claude walks into the room. Mary's eyes are closed and a deep flush is on her cheeks. He closes the door behind him.

Mary's eyes open and widen in horror. She rolls off and kneels on the bed looking at him, resting her weight on her hands, her breasts swaying heavily. The man rolls off the other side of the bed and grabs frantically at the pile of clothing on the floor. He is very young, nineteen or twenty.

"Get out of my house," Claude says. The man nods and scurries out of the room, clutching a bundle of clothes to his chest.

Mary is still crouched on the bed, looking at him.

"You too," he says. "Get out."

They look at each other for a long time. Several times, she opens her mouth as if to speak, then stops.

"Get out," he says again. He walks over to the window, pulls open the drapes and looks out at the backyard. He hears her moving about the room behind him, getting dressed. The dresser opens and shuts several times and he hears the zipper of an overnight bag closing. Then silence. He can sense her presence there behind him, looking at him.

"I know you don't want to talk now—" she says. He doesn't turn around. Finally, he hears her footsteps leaving the room and padding down the stairs.

He sits on the bed and puts his head in his hands. The ecstasy on her face burns into his brain, segues to the cold, dead eyes of the prostitute. *Give it to me, baby.* He thinks of the gun in the locked strongbox on the top shelf of the closet. He cleans in regularly and keeps it loaded. *Give it to me.*

The door creaks open and Claude looks up. Zoe is standing there. Her mouth is open and a small rivulet of drool trails down her chin.

"Zoe—" His voice catches in his throat. "Come here, baby."

He puts his arms around her, buries his face in her hair. He strokes her shoulders, her back, reaching down over the small, innocent curves of her buttocks. His erection is straining at his pants; he feels it coming up from somewhere deep in the center of him. Part of him watches in

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horror, but he can no more stop himself now than he could have stopped the Soviet tanks that long-ago summer.

Suddenly, he senses another presence in the room and looks up.

She is standing in the doorway, her form shot through with coruscating streaks of light, coalescing into substance. *Mother.*

"Little honey bear," she says in Hungarian. She walks toward him and sits next to him on the bed. He is still holding his daughter, but the desire he felt roaring inside him is gone like smoke in a sudden breeze. His mother puts her arms around both of them. It is strange—she is a small woman, but her arms easily encircle them. She begins to sing in a quiet voice. He recognizes the melody immediately, rich in Eastern European half-tone grace notes. It is a song she used to sing to him and Alya when they were little.

"She builds her city
the white goddess
builds it
not on the sky or earth
but on a cloud branch
builds
three gates to enter it
one gate she builds
in gold
the second pearls
the third in scarlet
where the gate is dry gold
there the goddess' son
is wedded
where the gate
is pearl
the goddess' daughter
is the bride
and where the gate is scarlet
solitary
sits the goddess."

"Mother—" he croaks, the Hungarian phonemes thick and awkward on his tongue.

She nods, a sad smile on her face. He can see himself there in the delicate curve of cheekbone, and in her eyes, his daughter.

"I've been trying to get through to you," she says. "It is very difficult, but the greater your need, the clearer the path is for me."

"The visions, the phone call—"

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She nods.

A sudden rush of horror sweeps through him. "Zoe—"

Again, she nods.

Tears fills his eyes. "Why—?"

She cradles his face in her small hands and he is there in the sticky August heat. Budapest, 1956. A tank with a bright red star on its side forces the jostling crowd down one of the narrow streets that fan out from Government Square. The treads alternately rumble and whine as the tank pushes away a burning car the crowd has placed in its path.

Bird-like panic. *She* is not a student, *she* is not an activist. She has been caught in the madness and swept along like a cork in a river. Someone hurls a Molotov cocktail at the tank. It bursts, sending a sheet of liquid fire across the armored hood. It dissipates quickly, flickers feebly, and is gone. The hatch of the tank opens and a head emerges. It is a very young man, his eyes wide with fear. A machine gun is cradled in his arms. Her eyes lock with his for an instant, then he pulls the bolt back and fires into the crowd. She feels a bursting in her chest, white light, impossible pain. . . .

She lifts her hands from his face. He looks in her eyes, searches in those clear, blue depths for something, some piece of himself.

"I thought you'd just left us, that you ran away." His voice stumbles, cracks.

She shakes her head. "Forgive me, Claude. I was never really there for you and Alya, never strong enough to protect you from your father. I wanted to. I would lie awake with the pain from his beatings, praying to God for the strength to take you away. But God had other plans for us." She pauses and looks away, bites her lip in a gesture that reminds him achingly of his daughter. She looks at him again, deep into his eyes. "Love is all there is, Claude. It is all you have. Stronger than fear, stronger than shame. It is all there is." She caresses his cheek. "You can begin to heal. This I can give to you."

She begins to fade, the pressure of her hand on his cheek like a wing, like a feather, gone.

"Daddy—" Zoe looks up at him.

"Yes, baby. I'm here." He puts his arms around her again.

They stay like that for a long time, father and daughter breathing together. Soon, she is asleep. He picks her up and carries her down the hall to her room. He tucks her into bed, pulling the sheets up under her chin. He rescues the toad from the corner and lays it next to her, folding her arm across its green, velvet stomach.

He walks down the stairs to the hall phone and dials the number. It rings twice and a voice answers.

"Hello?" Her accent fills him. He takes a deep breath.

"Hello," he says in Hungarian. "Hello, Alya." ●

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GOOD WITH RICE

John Brunner

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It's been more than ten years since we last published a story by this distinguished British author. Mr. Brunner won the 1969 Hugo award for his novel, *Stand on Zanzibar*. Other seminal works include *The Whole Man*, *The Square in the City*, *The Sheep Look Up*, and *The Shockwave Rider*. Del Rey Books released his most recent novel, *Muddle Earth*, last September.

art: Steve Cavallo

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. . . crept the last few hundred meters into Guangzhou Central station at less than walking pace. The train was so named because it hailed from about as far west as one could go without leaving the country. It was not, however, those of its thousand-odd passengers who had ridden it for the full two-and-a-half days that tried to open the doors before it halted, and on failing—because the rolling-stock was of the most modern design, with an interlock connected to the braking system—stuck their heads out of the windows to voice futile complaints. Rather, it was those who had joined it closer to this final destination, who had not yet had time to sink into the ancient lethargy of the long-distance traveler, so appropriate to a land whose very dust smeared one's skin with the powder of ancestral bones.

But their impatience was to meet a further check.

There must be some very influential people in the first carriage behind the locomotive. Where that car was to draw up, a section of the platform was isolated by metal barriers. Carpet had been laid. Railway officials in their smartest attire hung about expectantly. Two women fussed over a little girl in jacket and trousers of red silk who was to present a bouquet. Backs to the train, soldiers stood on guard bearing carbines at the port.

The exalted passengers should have emerged at once, accepted the flowers and the compliments, and been whisked to a waiting limousine. Instead, there was some sort of hitch. Had they been able to see why they were obliged to wait, perhaps even enjoy the little bit of spectacle, the passengers would have shrugged the matter off. Wherever one went in China nowadays, there always seemed to be Important People thrusting to the head of the line: politicians soliciting support for this or that school of opinion; businessmen involved (or claiming to be) in discussions with foreign corporations, Japanese, American, European; experts in a hundred disciplines seeking ways to mend the sick heart of the land. . . . As it was, though, the crowd quickly grew restive.

There are, of course, no such things as coincidences, and Policeman Wang was far too good a Taoist to imagine otherwise. When he looked back later, though, he could not help being struck by the number of preconditions necessary to set in motion the chain of events that was so soon to change the world—or rather, let the world find out how it was already being changed.

For instance, but for the delay in getting the Important Passengers away to their car, he might well not have spotted the old peasant as he hobbled by amid the throng, swept past like an autumn maple-leaf abob

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on a swollen stream. Or even if he had, which certainly was possible because in this thriving Special Economic Zone the fellow cut such an incongruous figure, would not have had the chance to act on his sudden inspiration—more properly called, he supposed, a hunch.

Being for the moment free of routine duties, such as discouraging peddlers anxious to fleece newly arrived countryfolk and noodle-cooks apt to overset their pushcarts in their eagerness to beat off competitors, he was able to take stock of his human surroundings in search of what had snagged his attention.

The passenger mix off the Sunset Dragon was typical for this time of a working day. There was a preponderance of men in suits and ties, clutching attaché cases and portfolios, fretting as though they were being conspired against and looking for someone to blame. There were merchants carrying craftwork, carpets, bales of cloth and skin rugs from non-endangered species such as pony and camel. There were a couple of priests in wide-brimmed conical hats, showing themselves openly again thanks to foreign insistence on religious toleration. There were a lot of elderly folk, remarkably spry because of their practice of *tai ch'i,* presumably here to visit relatives working in the city and thus allowed to live in it. There were virtually no children other than babes in arms, for it was during school hours, but Wang caught sight of three in a group, sickly and sad, presumably on their way to be examined at a hospital. There were several young people whom Wang would dearly have liked to accost, to find out why they weren't studying or at work, but they looked too well-dressed for him to risk it. Either they came from rich and influential families, untouchable by the police, or they were drug-dealers or black-marketeers, so he would be interfering in areas for which another branch of the force was responsible, or—in the case of the girls and possibly some of the boys as well—they were prostitutes who very probably had triad protectors. Sometimes Wang doubted whether the bosses in Beijing had understood what they were letting themselves in for when they insisted on reuniting Hong Kong with China.

But he didn't want to think about Hong Kong.

Heterogeneous though those around him were, the old peasant still stood out like a rock in a rice-bowl. (Old? Probably he was no more than fifty, but he had lost several teeth, the rest were stained with tobacco, and under his greasy blue cotton cap his face was so ingrained with dirt that every wrinkle, every line, was doubly overscored.) He was shabbily dressed in garb reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, much repaired; only his shoes were new. Over one shoulder he balanced a bamboo pole, sagging at both ends for the weight of one bundle tied in cloth and one sack that failed to disguise its contents, an oblong hamper. He seemed unwilling to rest his load on the ground, though it must be tiring in the

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warmth of Guangdong. No doubt of it: rather than just being annoyed by the holdup, he was nervous. He kept glancing around in a totally different manner from his companions. When his gaze strayed to Wang, it darted away on the instant.

He's worried about the hamper. What's in it?

At Wang's side his partner Ho said sourly, "This lot look as though they could turn nasty. How much longer are they going to be kept hanging about?"

Wang disregarded the question. His eyes were still fixed on the old peasant.

"Not talking to me today, hm?" Ho said huffily. He had small liking for Wang, whom he regarded as an idiot. To have spent a year in Hong Kong and not come back rich—what a wasted chance! In many ways he reminded Wang of his wife, who seldom tired of saying the same.

But never mind him. The dignitaries had finally emerged from the train, the bouquet was being presented, there were bows and handshakes and official cordiality in progress. Wang reached a decision. Raising the aerial on his radio, he requested the co-operation of their squad commander, Inspector Chen.

Who was not a bad sort, Wang felt; at least he didn't share Ho's low opinion of him. He asked no questions and didn't even frown at being summoned by a subordinate. Together they closed on the peasant, with a scowling Ho in their wake.

Seeing police approach with batons drawn, the peasant panicked. He dropped his burden and would have fled, save that the crowd was not only too dense but also surging into motion as the barriers ahead were moved aside. Trapped, he turned through half a circle, closed his eyes, and pressed both hands against his chest, swaying as from a weak heart. A young man with a dark sly face reached for the fallen pole. Wang's baton cracked down one centimeter from his outstretched fingers. Mind changed, the fellow scurried away. By now Ho was steadying the peasant to save him from falling—vastly against his will, as was obvious from his expression of distaste.

"What do you suspect?" Inspector Chen muttered, with upraised baton directing the rest of the squad to hold back the crowd—rather like the conductor of a western orchestra.

There was a powerful smell of urine, more pungent even than the stench of humanity below the station roof. On the basis of that, plus the obvious fact that the peasant was of far-western stock, Wang said, positively, "A banned animal."

Chen stared for a moment. "Could anyone still be that stupid?" he demanded. Then he glanced at the peasant, who had recovered enough of his wits to glare daggers. "Let the fool sit down!" he called to Ho in

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passing, thus answering by implication his own question. With a gesture he indicated that Wang should fetch and open the sack.

Instead of consenting to sit, the peasant wrenched free of Ho's grip, fell to his knees and implored mercy with repeated kowtows. His accent was so thick they could barely grasp what he was saying, though it included some excuse about his wife being ill. But there was no mistaking the import of his actions.

Chen eyed Wang sardonically. Speaking clearly and slowly, with the intention of being understood, "You were right. He is a fool. Now let's find out what kind of animal it is. Better yet, why doesn't the fool tell us? You—what's-your-name!"

The old man was blubbering by now. Ho caught both his pipestem wrists in one hand and tugged a wad of greasy papers from the side pocket of his jacket—a stupid place to carry them in a crowded train, of course. Maybe he had got away with it because no one was much interested in stealing the identity of an old countryman.

"Name!" Chen snapped. When no reply was forthcoming he signalled to Ho.

"He's called Lin Yung-fei," the latter reported, having fumbled open the wad of papers. He added, punning on Lin's primary meaning of forest, "Perfect for a raw-food-eating barbarian!"

The insult cut short the peasant's sobs and he went back to glowering. It was a poor joke, though. Ignoring it, Chen indicated to Wang that he should proceed with his examination of the hamper. Circumspectly he complied: first untying the rope that attached the sack to the carrying-pole, then opening the sack and pushing it to ground-level on all sides, thus revealing that the hamper was made of wicker and that its lid was secured with rough wooden pegs.

The stink made it indisputable that his conclusion was correct.

The passengers from the arriving train had dispersed, but they were still surrounded by a score or more of onlookers. Wherever one went it seemed there were always people with nothing better to do, who veered to swarm like kites at every breath of an event. So long as they didn't try to meddle it was pointless to order them away. As many again would spring up, faster than mushrooms.

Lin recovered his voice long enough to curse: first his luck, then whoever the "friend" was who had told him he could make a lot of money by smuggling a rare animal to a big city, and thirdly the police. At that stage Ho's baton prodded him in the kidneys and he subsided.

The hamper-lid had holes around the fastening-pegs. Cautiously applying one eye, Wang confirmed that there was indeed an animal inside. It was brown, lithe and sleek; it had sharp white teeth in a wicked-looking jaw; and it had claws.

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"It looks," he said slowly, "like a large ferret."

The peasant snorted. Apparently he had run out of lies and denials. "Just the sort of stupid remark you'd expect from a townie!" he rasped. "She's not a ferret, she's a marten!"

Wang nodded. He had heard the term and seen pictures.

"Is that a protected species?" Chen demanded, and didn't wait for an answer. "I guess it must be. If not, why is he bringing it here?"

Sadly Wang reflected that there had been a time when such a question could have been answered legitimately in more ways than one: as a pet for my grandson, to be trained to rid our home of rats, to be bred so the pelts of her young can be made into hats and gloves. . . .

That, though, had been before the tidal wave of humankind turned half of China into wasteland. He himself was married, to his cost, but he had not taken up his legal chance to become a father because he didn't want to be guilty of causing yet more desolation. To his wife, of course, he claimed it was because modern advances in biology would soon ensure a hundred percent guarantee that their sole child would be a son—and wasn't that what her mother had dreamed of all her life? Ho often taunted him for waiting, pointing out that there was always a fifty-fifty chance, but since his own child was a girl his gibes rang hollow.

"All right," Inspector Chen said after a pause, raising his radio. "I'll warn base that we're bringing this lot in. Ho, put handcuffs on the old fool. Wang, you carry the whatever-it's-called. You!"—more loudly, to the onlookers. "Move on! The fun's over, such as it was."

At that point Ho spoke up unexpectedly. Much as he claimed to look down on countryfolk as a rule, it wasn't the first time he had boasted of special knowledge due to rural ancestors. "Be careful!" he warned. "I know about martens. They can give you a nasty bite. This one's sure to be in a vile temper after being shut up hungry for so long. Matter of fact, I'm surprised it hasn't chewed its way out of the hamper!"

Wang hesitated. He was about to say that the animal didn't look very aggressive when he was forestalled by Lin.

"Who said I kept her hungry? I'm not so stupid that I'd starve a valuable animal! She's worth much more alive than dead!"

He gave no indication of whether he wanted the marten alive because she was to be bred from, or for the more prosaic reason that no decent Chinese housewife would feed her family on flesh she herself had not seen killed.

"Is that true?" Chen demanded. Wang applied his eye to the hole in the hamper-lid again.

"Yes, it does seem to have something to eat. Some kind of fruit, by the look of it. Right?" he added to Lin.

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Before the old man could reply, Ho interrupted. "Martens are carnivores," he scoffed. "They eat meat, not fruit."

"They eat that sort!" Lin snapped. "Same as we do!"

"What sort?" Chen demanded. Lin shrugged.

"That sort! We call it 'good-with-rice' because it is."

Wang felt a faint prickling on the back of his neck. He sensed something unfitting to the proper order of things. By his frown Chen did also. Having contacted base to warn of their arrival, the inspector added a request for someone to take charge of the marten, and then, after a brief hesitation, a further request, this time for information about kinds of fruit that carnivores might eat. The sense of bewilderment at the far end was almost audible.

That done, he returned his radio to its clip at his belt.

"Right!" he barked. "Let's go!"

THE TOWER OF STRENGTH

. . . pharmacy was typical of its kind: long dark wooden counters with many drawers below; more drawers in the cabinets that lined the walls, holding leaves, roots, stalks, flowers, seeds, bark, fungi; organs from animals, birds, reptiles, fish; dried blood, musk, gall, even dung, especially from birds; at intervals, work-stations where the staff weighed out these and other substances on shiny new electronic scales, then comminuted them in electric grinders—to the annoyance of many of the customers who thronged the premises, for they were as conservative as their devotion to traditional medicine indicated, and felt that some subtle essence might be lost from a drug if it were not pounded with an iron pestle in a marble mortar. But the only pestle and mortar to be seen reposed in the display window, gathering dust alongside a set of old-style balances with wide shallow pans of tarnished brass.

One thing, however, absolutely had not changed: the smell. From earliest childhood Wang could testify to that. Never the same yet never different, the aroma of a pharmacy was unique.

And it seemed to make people more than usually discourteous and pushful—or perhaps that stemmed from the anxiety due to being ill, or having someone ill in the family. Under most circumstances the citizens of Guangzhou retained some of their ancient respect for authority, and would move aside at the sight of a police uniform, but in here he could scarcely take two steps together.

Eventually he worked his way to the nearer of the two cash desks, whose occupant seemed harassed enough to be the manager or even the

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owner. This was one place where the wind of progress had not yet stirred the dust; his fingers were flickering across an abacus.

Leaning forward, Wang said sharply, "They told me at the university that I could find Dr. Soo Long here."

The manager, if such he were, looked as though he had bitten a sour fruit. He gave an inexact jerk of his head: *Over there!* Wang glanced around, but saw nothing bar customers, staff, and a closed door.

"Where—?" he began. The other sighed.

"In the stock-room, being a nuisance as usual."

"Through that door?"

"Yes!" And back to counting, calculating, making change.

A senior clerk was supervising a junior one as they unpacked a box containing several jars and packets. They tensed as Wang entered, as though the box might contain something illegal, but if so it was none of his business, today at any rate. He stared around. Obviously this room's primary use was for checking and dividing up incoming supplies before transfer to the shop. At any rate the only other person visible—visible in the sense of giving a recognizable human shape to clothing, but in fact concealed head to toe by a green coverall and a black hood—was carrying out some kind of test on some kind of sample, using a machine that printed out density graphs on scaled paper.

"I'm looking for Dr. Soo Long," Wang announced. The third person turned, removing the black hood.

"I'm Sue Long. What do you want?"

The words were in good Cantonese, albeit with a Hong Kong accent. But the face was wrong—thin and pale under near-white hair cut very short—and so of course was the sex. For a long moment Wang could only stare.

"Well?" Dr. Long said impatiently. Wang recovered himself and fumbled in a pouch that hung at his belt.

"Uh . . . Sorry to bother you, Dr. Long, but—uh—your department at the university said I could find you here. It's about this."

He held out one of the partly gnawed fruits they had recovered from the marten's hamper.

The machine at Dr. Long's side uttered a beep and spilled ten extra centimeters of paper tape, unmarked; the end of a run. Excusing herself, she extracted a sample of what looked like tree-bark—there was a strong whiff of industrial solvent—sealed it in an envelope and clipped it to the paper tape before accepting the fruit. For a moment she didn't seem to know what to make of it: then the light dawned.

"Whose teeth? Some sort of cat—? No, that's not a feline dentition. What?"

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"A marten."

"Really!" She raised the fruit to her nose and gave a cautious sniff. "That's a peculiar odor for a fruit, isn't it? But I guess it would have to be, to tempt a carnivore like a marten."

Wang felt a stir of relief at not having to explain why she ought to be interested. "You don't recognize it, then?" he ventured.

"No, I've never run across anything similar. How did you come by it?" She was turning it over in her hands—which, he suddenly noticed, were gloved.

He recounted the morning's events. With every moment of the narrative she grew tenser. At the end she burst out, "Where did you say this peasant hails from, this Lin?"

He repeated the address on the man's greasy ID papers.

"Is that so!" She whistled astonishment, by Chinese standards a most unwomanly act. But Wang had already begun to suspect that he was dealing with a person who didn't fit pigeonholes. "Well!" she added after a moment. "I guess I'd better pay your inspector a visit."

"Your work—?"

"Some of it's waited thousands of years. Another day or two won't hurt."

She was peeling off her gloves as she spoke. Noticing his eyes on them, she explained, "To make sure cells from my skin don't contaminate the specimens. This too, of course"—meaning the coverall which she now also discarded, revealing an open-necked shirt and denim shorts appropriate for the end-of-summer weather if not for the starchier citizens of Guangzhou. With brisk, practiced motions she disconnected her machine, which folded, gathered up her day's findings, stowed the lot in a satchel and headed for a rear door.

"You don't need to tell the boss—?"

"He's not my boss, praise be! This way!"

In an alley beyond the door, chained to an iron grille, stood a Kawasaki motorcycle. From the satchel she drew a crash-helmet made of unilatrium, deformable in two dimensions but rigid in the third. She didn't have a spare for Wang, but the traffic police were unlikely to challenge a fellow officer. Bestriding the machine, thumb poised over the starter, she interrupted herself.

"You do have more of those fruits?"

"Yes, the old man had a few left. He seems to have survived the whole trip on them. Plus rice and tea, of course."

He hesitated. Mistaking his reaction, Dr. Long said, "If you don't fancy riding with me—"

"No, no! That's quite all right." He had to lick dry lips nonetheless; the prospect of being a passenger on any motorbike in Guangzhou traffic

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would have been daunting. "No, I was just wondering about something." He settled himself gingerly on the pillion.

"What?"

"Why you—uh—whistled when you were told where Lin comes from."

They were under way with impressive smoothness. Also quietness; they needed to raise their voices mostly because of the traffic.

"Where's the likeliest place in all of China to find an unknown fruit?"

Light dawned. "Green Phoenix Forest?"

"Where else?"

For a while she concentrated on driving while he pondered the implications. Then, while they were stopped at a red light, he ventured, "If you don't mind my asking, why did the university send me looking for you when I told them what we'd found?"

"Didn't they explain about my work?"

"No, I was expecting to meet some sort of specialist or consultant acting as an advisor to the pharmacy."

"That's not my line." The light changed; they hummed on, but only as far as the next. Walking would barely have been slower. "You know we're wiping out one species after another—plants, animals, insects?"

"Yes, of course. Aren't some of them supposed to be a terrible loss because they could have given us new drugs and even new types of food?"

"They're a terrible loss in any case, but you've got the idea. Well, using a technique I developed jointly with colleagues in America, I'm trying to recover the DNA, the germ-plasm, of plants so rare they may already be extinct. Obviously, the likeliest place to find them is a pharmacy like the Tower of Strength. They don't like me delving around in their expensive stock, but if there's the slightest chance we may catch a vanishing species before it's gone forever.... And whenever I get an opportunity—though this is mainly for my own interest—I also look for DNA in dragon-bones."

Those were an ingredient in many expensive traditional medicines: dinosaur bones occasionally, typically those of more ordinary animals inscribed with questions in ancient times, prior to divination and the casting of lots to foretell the future. Wang assumed she was referring more to the former.

"Most people say it's futile," she added. "But you never know."

Within five minutes of entering the police station Wang found out why the university had recommended calling in Dr. Long. She raked Lin with questions like a salvo of guided missiles, each striking to the heart of a new subject. She lost a few minutes being sidetracked by what Wang had half-grasped at the station: Lin's excuse was his wife's illness. What

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it might be was unclear—some form of cancer, possibly. However, since the lady wasn't here it seemed pointless to pursue the matter. Dr. Long was in any case far more interested in this curious fruit that appealed even to martens.

"And foxes, and cats, and dogs, and stoats and weasels!" Lin insisted, in hopes maybe of mitigating his inevitable punishment. A young man from the city zoo had turned up to claim the marten just before Dr. Long and Wang arrived, and was impatiently waiting for permission to remove it thither and go home.

"And humans," Wang said dryly.

Dr. Long glanced at him.

"Yes," she said in an indecipherable tone. "And humans . . . Tell me please"—to the young man from the zoo—"is this animal healthy?"

A shrug. "So far as I can tell without a full examination. It seems a bit lethargic, but that may just be because its belly is full."

"Yes." Dr. Long pondered, tapping one of her large white front teeth with a fingernail. "Keep it under observation for the time being," she continued at last. "Collect its urine, collect its droppings, above all preserve any vomitus. I want to hear of any unusual behavior the moment it happens. I'll give you my card."

Taking umbrage at being ordered about by a woman, and in particular a round-eye, the man from the zoo bridled and would have spoken but for intercepting a glare from Inspector Chen. Dr. Long either did not notice or successfully affected so.

"As to the fruit," she went on, glancing at the window (why, it was growing dark—where had the day gone?) "I need it at my lab. I want to run a sample through an analyzer, then beam the results to the States and have them checked against a database. If it's something already known, only I never heard of it, that'll be great. Otherwise. . . ."

Inspector Chen cleared his throat. "Otherwise?" he repeated.

"Otherwise, Inspector, we may have an international lawsuit on our hands. It wouldn't be the first time this country has released to the environment a genetically modified organism without proper safeguards, let alone FAO approval."

Wang reacted to her choice of words before he could stop himself. "*We* may?"

Dr. Long glanced coolly at him. "I'm Chinese, Mr. Wang. For all that I was born in the States. I married a Chinese, moved here, took his nationality . . . And stayed on when he ran away. I trust that answers all your obvious questions?"

Wang wished very much he could vanish on a trapeze of clouds, like Monkey.

"Right! Now if you'll kindly let me have the fruit, I'll sign a pro-tem

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receipt. I'll fax you an official one when I get to the lab, on behalf of the university. Don't let the old man go, will you?"

"Of course not"—stoutly from Chen. "He'll be hauled up in court and duly sentenced for—"

"Oh, forget that! He's far too important to be sent to jail!"

Lin brightened visibly, like the sun emerging from cloud.

"He's going to help us find the source of the fruit—*first!*"

The sun went in again.

Swinging her satchel with the remaining fruit in it, Dr. Long nodded to the company and headed for the door. Wang spoke up.

"Just a moment! I think I ought to come with you!"

Startled, Chen glanced at his watch. "You should have gone off shift half an hour ago," he objected. "Though you're quite right, of course. If this fruit is unique, at least around here—"

"Then if someone were to snatch Dr. Long's bag," Wang broke in, "it would be a disaster. I don't mind escorting her." (No mention of the real reason he would rather not go home). "To be honest, what she has told me about her work has sparked my interest. I'd like to find out more if she can spare the time."

Chen hesitated, but saw no way to object. He often commended his subordinates for displaying interest in unusual subjects that might one day prove relevant to police work, and who could say that this would not turn out useful in connection with protected animals and illegal plants? In any case, he was forestalled.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Wang. I carry a teargas pistol, of course, but it's not a practical weapon on a motorbike. And you're absolutely right; it would be a disaster if we lost this fruit."

"You sound as though . . . " Chen began.

"As though I'm worried? Yes, Inspector, I am. I've lived in this country more than ten years. I've specialized in protected species of all kinds, animal and vegetable, terrestrial and aquatic. If there were anything in the literature about a fruit that not only humans but martens can thrive on, I'd know. I think. But I don't."

Handing Wang her satchel, retrieving from it her gauntlets and helmet before letting him sling it over his shoulder, she followed him back to the police-station parking lot.

THE UGLY TURTLE

. . . was the city-wide nickname for the floating extension to Guangzhou University, whose curving roof-plates bordered with guttering to catch precious rain did somewhat resemble a turtle's carapace. Pressure on

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living-space was not yet as intense as in Hong Kong or many cities in Japan, but rather than sacrifice more precious agricultural land for a new and badly needed biology laboratory it had been decided to moor it, along with a student dormitory and extra staff accommodation, to the bank of the Zhujiang, there being far less river traffic than formerly. Access to the area was restricted, at least in theory, but in practice there were so many people with a valid excuse to come and go that security was a joke. There wasn't even a guard on duty at the end of the gangway where they dismounted. Wang pushed the Kawasaki to the alcove where it was kept, frowning at such laxness.

At least the laboratory Dr. Long then led him to was properly protected. In a large room smelling faintly of ozone computer screens glowed and automatic machinery, somewhat like the device she had been using at the Tower of Strength, purred unattended. She began by transferring her day's findings to a university in America, via satellite, a process that took only moments. Then she chose from her satchel one of Lin's unbitten fruit and fed it to a machine that automatically cut sections off it, examined their macrostructure, triturated them, fractionated the pulp and peel separately using eight different solvents each at four temperatures, recording everything at every stage. . . . Used as he was to analyzers in police-work, for DNA comparison and the like, Wang could not help being impressed by the speed and compactness of Dr. Long's equipment.

"There," she said at length. "Now I could do with some tea. Do you have time for a cup before you leave?"

Suddenly Wang realized he was hungry, thirsty, and tired. He accepted gratefully, and she led him to her room, off a corridor beyond the lab. It was as spartan as the police barracks he had lived in before his marriage. Waving him to a chair, she filled a kettle, made tea, opened a box of crackers, and sat down with a barely suppressed yawn.

He did honestly want to learn more about her work, but now he had the chance he felt too nervous. This self-assured young woman—she couldn't be more than five years older than his own count of thirty—was utterly different from anyone he had met before. He did at least manage to ask how long it would take to identify the fruit.

"Don't expect miracles," was the wry answer. "Amazing changes can be brought about by altering even a tiny sequence of DNA. You know we're more than 99 percent identical with chimpanzees? But there's quite a difference, isn't there?"

"Do you think it's a—a natural mutation?"

"How natural is natural? If it does come from Green Phoenix—well, admittedly they were desperate when they launched the project, but no one had the faintest idea how genes like those would react in the wild, especially the ones for accelerated growth. There are some which, if they

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got into bacteria. . . . Still, it hasn't happened yet. Maybe we'll be lucky. Maybe Gaea is on our side again. More tea?"

"No, I must be going. Thank you very much." He rose, resigned to home, to the cramped flat always full of his wife's complaints.

"Did you take the key out of my bike?"

"I'm sorry—I thought you had."

"No, I had to leave it in or the front wheel would have locked and you couldn't have pushed it. I'll collect it now."

And at the point where he turned for shore and she toward where the bike was kept, they wished each other good night.

Halfway down the gangway he heard her exclaim, and glanced back. Barely visible in shadow, a man was bending over her machine. Startled by her approach, he jerked upright. Light flashed: a long-bladed knife.

Wang clawed for a grip on his baton, wishing he were allowed a gun, but before he had taken his first step in Dr. Long's direction he was rushed by two other men from the shore end of the gangway. Swinging wildly, he clouted the first on the head hard enough to make him curse and sway, but the second kicked his legs from under him and then kicked him again in the belly, driving the wind out of him.

For a long moment all he could think of was that now he would never know the truth about the marten and the Green Phoenix fruit.

Then there was a scream, a shout, the noise of feet on the steel floor. He felt something warmly wet splatter his bare arms as a man stumbled past him, ordering the other two to follow. But he had no chance to see what any of them looked like.

He shut his eyes and spent a long and welcome moment working his belly-muscles free of agony.

"Are you all right?"

It was Dr. Long's voice. Wang managed to drag himself to his feet, using the rail for support. "How—?" he husked.

"You saved my life."

"What?"

"For official purposes!" she snapped. Feeling something sticky on his skin, he glanced down. It looked black in the artificial light but it had to be blood. Shed by the man who had staggered past from the direction of where the bike was kept. . . . Comprehension dawned.

"Not his knife. Yours."

"Correct. I'd better lose it before your chums show up."

"They won't have been told yet," he objected.

"Of course not! Who likes getting mixed up in police business? Same everywhere, you know: in any American city you can be beaten to death

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with a hundred people in earshot . . . But you've got to radio in, haven't you?"

"I—uh—I suppose so."

"Go ahead, then. It'll look suspicious if you delay. Don't mention a knife. Say you came to the bike with me and when he jumped us you cracked him in the face and made his nose bleed, or split his lip, or something."

"But you actually cut him, didn't you? How deep?"

"How should I know?"—angrily. Then, relenting: "Yes, pretty deep. I don't suppose he'll get very far."

"Then the story won't hold water. If they find him alive—"

"It's *got* to hold water!" She turned blazing eyes on him. "I can't afford to be hamstrung by some petty criminal!"

He was on the point of saying something to the effect that robbery with violence wasn't so petty, when the look on her face prevented him. He said after a moment, "I'll do what I can."

"Good. Then I'd be obliged if you could stick around for a while." A quaver crept into her self-assured tone. "I never hurt anyone before. I mean not really meaning to hurt."

"He was going to steal your bike," Wang grunted, poising his radio.

"That's what he wanted me to think."

He checked as the implications sank in.

"What he wanted you to think?" he repeated slowly.

"The key was in. If all he was after was the bike he could have got away before I interrupted. I ride it down the gangplank all the time."

"What else, if not theft?"

"I don't know. But I can think of one peculiar thing that's happened today." She passed a weary hand across her hair. "Oh, maybe I'm paranoid, but a lot of high-ranking politicians staked their futures on Green Phoenix. And bioengineering has erupted from nowhere to become a multi-billion business. . . . Are you never going to call in?"

Wang came back to himself with a start. Her comments had brought to mind countless rumors he himself had heard ever since Green Phoenix was first announced. It was the most ambitious reclamation project in history—not just refforestation, but an attempt to create on ruined hills a unique, precisely calculated mix of trees, shrubs, grasses, epiphytes, saprophytes, fungi, every kind of plant, together with the micro-organisms necessary for their proper coexistence. All the plants were to be of proven benefit to humanity, whether by supplying food, or timber, or fibers, or drugs, or dyes; but all of them had been modified. That was what frightened people. Probably that was what was troubling Dr. Long. Though—the thought ran through Wang's mind as he whispered into his

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radio—how could anyone in Guangzhou have learned about the mysterious fruit so quickly, let alone where it was being taken? Could one of the regular traders in endangered animals have been waiting at the station? Unlikely; they were too recognizable. An agent, perhaps a new recruit, who had sneaked away baffled? How about the man who had tried to steal Lin's belongings? No, he would scarcely have been so blatant if he worked for one of the big traffickers . . .

Meantime he was uttering mechanical words.

There proved to be a patrol car within two blocks. It rounded the corner, siren wailing. He knew one of its crew by sight. They recorded statements, took samples of the drying blood, sighed over the unlikelihood of finding the culprit unless he was silly enough to get arrested on a different charge, and eventually gave Wang a lift to a stop on the busline serving his home district. Weary to the marrow, hungry and thirsty all over again, he returned to a note from his wife: since he hadn't turned up at the promised time she had gone to her mother's for the evening and might or might not be back.

He ate what he could find, stepped under a cool shower, and fell asleep as soon as he lay down. He dreamed about unwholesome creatures emerging from the Zhujiang and feeding on shiny metallic fruit that had erupted all over the Ugly Turtle like so many boils.

On arriving for work exactly one week later, he was summoned before Chief Superintendent Tan. Wondering what he might have done wrong, he obeyed at once. Others were already there. Inspector Chen's presence as his squad commander was no surprise, but with him was Dr. Long. She looked not just tired but exhausted, indeed visibly older, as though as many years had passed for her as days had for the rest of the world.

The chief spoke up without preamble. "Your report about last week's incident at the University Biological Department was incomplete," he rumbled. Wang felt a stir of apprehension, assuming that the man Dr. Long had stabbed must have been found and recounted his side of the story. But he was wrong.

"Dr. Long tells me your prompt intervention saved her life. You made no mention of the fact."

"Sir, I think—"

"There's no need to be modest," Dr. Long sighed. "I've said you deserve a commendation."

"Well, that's—uh . . . " His voice faltered from incredulity.

"It's too late to object," Tan said. "Sit down, by the way." Waving at a vacant chair, he leaned back in his own.

"Dr. Long has come with an unusual request," he went on, "but before

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I tell you what it is I gather there's something else she wants to say. Dr. Long?"

"Thank you." She rubbed her eyes, suppressing a yawn, and interpolated with a grimace, "Sorry, but I haven't had much sleep lately. I received a preliminary report from the States about that peculiar fruit not long after you went home, and it's kept me busy ever since. It's—uh—disturbing."

Wang tensed. "Is the fruit in fact from Green Phoenix?"

"That's the strangest aspect of the matter. They say not. That's to say, everyone except Lin says not."

Chen's eyes widened; Wang noticed from the corner of his own gaze. Tan was rather better at controlling his expression, but even he showed the ghost of a reaction.

"On the other hand," Dr. Long pursued, "I've traced reports of something similar from other places: Singapore, Hawaii, Australia. Not documented, not scientifically investigated. Not until now, that is."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," Wang admitted, sensing that the others would welcome a confession of ignorance.

"The fruit derives from a plum. As you must have noticed, though, it doesn't smell like a plum."

"No, it smells more like—well—raw meat. Like pork, maybe."

"To judge by the way the marten ate it, it must taste like pork as well. In fact that's exactly what Lin compared it to. When the report from America came through I made myself very unpopular by having him hauled out of his cell and carted off to City Hospital. I thought I'd had a bright idea. I was wrong." She rubbed her eyes again and this time failed to overrule a yawn.

"He's in pretty good health all things considered. On the other hand his wife is not likely to last out the year. She has a massive fibroid growth in her abdomen. It was discovered last month when she was undergoing a hysterectomy. Lin was able to tell me where the operation was performed, and even the name of the surgeon. I made myself unpopular with him too, by routing him out before breakfast."

She drew a deep breath.

"In the far west the incidence of this type of growth has shown an upsurge in the past few years. Commonest continues to be stomach cancer attributable to a diet high in spiced and salted food. Next commonest are cancer of the lung, mouth, and colon. However, in a remarkably short time this new one has achieved fifth place. Stranger yet, it's confined exclusively to adult women. What do you make of that?"

Wang licked his lips. "Something to do with the fruit?" he hazarded. "You're implying it's been modified to make its flesh more like animal tissue. But in that case the UN—"

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"Quite right: the forest is nominally under UN supervision, though in practice that boils down to satellite inspections and an occasional guided tour for VIP's. However, they are supposed to receive details of all gene-modifying experiments, and there is no mention of any such project in records made available to FAO."

"Accidentally, then? It seems so unlikely. . . "

"Under normal circumstances I'd agree." Despite her fatigue, Dr. Long's tone was regaining some of its former crispness. "However, as I remember telling you, these circumstances aren't normal."

Wang nodded thoughtfully. He could well understand what lay behind Dr. Long's disquiet. There were political and economic factors, too. He recalled her reference to the powerful individuals who had staked their futures on the success of Green Phoenix. They wouldn't like it at all if it turned out that one of their creations—or rather one of the creations they had lent their blessing to—was responsible for an epidemic of cancer.

Maybe Dr. Long had not been so paranoid after all when she wondered whether the thieves had really come after her Kawasaki.

There was a short silence. Eventually Tan cleared his throat. "Dr. Long is planning to visit Green Phoenix," he said.

She nodded. "I expect permission any day. For once the UN's right of inspection is to be fully implemented. There have been misgivings about Green Phoenix right from the start, not just overseas but in this country too. The full-bellies have never approved, have they?"

It struck Wang as incongruous to hear this blonde round-eye refer so casually to one of the unofficial factions in the present Chinese government. Some held that a surplus of food allowed the leisure to plot subversion, so it was safer to keep the people hungry, others that shortages made them angry enough to rebel. In allusion to an ancient proverb they were nicknamed "full-bellies" and "empty-bellies." Obviously massive reclamation projects were anathematical to the former.

But what did all this have to do with Policeman Wang? He cast an inquiring look at Tan. "Dr. Long?" the chief superintendent invited.

"Mr. Wang, I hope you don't mind, but . . . well, I don't have to tell you that if this fruit does in fact originate from Green Phoenix sundry persons will find themselves in jeopardy. They may take steps to protect their reputations. The way you reacted the other night made me feel I can rely on you. I've asked for you to be detached on special assignment. I want you, in effect, to be my bodyguard."

"There's no need to decide at once," Tan began. "When permission comes through for the trip—Is something wrong?"

"No, sir." Wang straightened to full height. "Thank you, Dr. Long, for the suggestion. I'd like to volunteer straight away."

* * *

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That added the near-theft of the Kawasaki to the necessary preconditions.

THE GREEN PHOENIX

. . . was indeed green. Brilliant viridian, searing emerald, acid lime, sprawled out of the five valleys where it had initially been seeded, that tapered in the manner of fingers—or claws—and now had surmounted all but the barest and rockiest of the intervening ridges. Sight of it drove away the headache that had plagued Wang since undergoing, last evening, a whole battery of said-to-be-necessary immunizations.

For it was wrong!

He had never traveled this far west before, never seen with his own eyes how valleys like these might have looked in olden time. He had never viewed the aboriginal firs and pines, breathed the electric scent of waterfalls, heard the clamor of uncounted birds. But images of them were part of the world he had been born to, immortalized in the work of long-dead artists, shadowed forth in poetry and legend, implicit to this day in the characters he had been taught to write with.

That was gone.

Instead, here loomed a mass like fungus, like pondweed, like moss, as crudely bright as though it had been painted, as stark as though it had been carved from plastic foam. Staring at it from the elderly twin-engined army plane Dr. Long had conjured up for the last stage of their journey, he felt horrified.

And more so yet when he looked elsewhere, for all the surrounding land bore testimony to the greed of humankind: scarps denuded of soil and vegetation; terraces ordained by far-off bureaucrats on the grounds that global warming had made it feasible to grow rice in this area, which squandered months of work and slumped at the first drop of rain, leaving cascades of mud to dry and blow away; felled logs by the hectare, last remnants of a noble forest, destined for sale abroad to the profit of parasitic middlemen, seized in the nick of time and kept back so that the local folk might warm their homes in winter, heat their food, and mulch their little plots with bark and sawdust before erosion stole the last trace of their fertile land. It had been a bold decision, much applauded. Even so thousands of the starving had had to be relocated or allowed to emigrate.

Now the Green Phoenix provided work—better: a sharable ambition—for about a million who remained. Nonetheless the process of attrition still went on. Wang had never thought before how small a number a million really was. No one knew, no one had known since the nineties of last century, the population of his home city. He could only repeat

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what he had been told, that it was about twice as great as in the year of his birth: four million, then? Mexico City comprised, so it was said, more than thirty million, of whom most were doomed to starve, catch AIDS, or die by violence.

Guangzhou was a cosmopolitan place—had been since before Wang was born. Twice a year it was invaded by thousands of foreign visitors attending the great trade fairs, and in between there were countless minor cultural events. Since 1997 it had been as open to the world as any part of China and much more than most. But never before had Wang felt the reality of the world beyond the frontiers of the Middle Kingdom as keenly as when watching—there was small point in listening, for he spoke no language but his own—Dr. Long invoking the support of colleagues in country after country through computers at the Ugly Turtle. Now as the plane droned toward the edge of the Green Phoenix, toward the little landing-strip that served the headquarters town whence it had been directed since the forest's inception, he sensed the first impact of what she had achieved. Waiting for them at the head of a group that included soldiers was a man in a dark civilian overcoat whose very posture betrayed a wish to be anywhere but here, and not merely because it was a dank and misty afternoon. Wang wondered whether he dared pose a question, but was saved the need. Dr. Long spoke up.

"I knew they were taking me seriously, but I didn't realize *how* seriously!"

The third passenger glanced at her. Wang had only met Dr. Bin on the flight from Guangzhou: a greying bespectacled man of middle height, introduced by Dr. Long as a fellow biologist but manifestly more than just another scientist. He exuded a scent of politics.

"That's Project Director Pao, is it?" he grunted. "I didn't know you'd met."

"We haven't," was the composed reply. "But can you imagine someone like him sending a deputy with all these rumors flying around?"

"Are you sure they've reached this far?" Bin countered. "If so, the next thing we can look forward to is lunatic headlines like GOODBYE TO HUNGER and FAREWELL TO FAMINE!"

Wang started. Even though he had gathered, from what Dr. Long had told him about her discussions with colleagues, that people had been surprised and impressed by what he still thought of as "Lin's fruit," he hadn't pictured it as having such global consequences.

Surely, though, she had implied that it also gave people cancer—or had he misunderstood somewhere along the line? Quite possibly. He had a new problem on his mind. When first proposed the notion of this trip had seemed like a heaven-sent escape from the misery of home. Now, however, he couldn't help hearing over and over his wife's threat that if

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he didn't come back on the promised day, not even one day later, she would sue for divorce.

He suspected that was what she secretly wanted. In today's China, where so many parents of the last generation had opted for a boy in the traditional manner, there was a multimillion surplus of males and any girl less ugly than a water-buffalo could pick and choose. People didn't even object to divorcées any longer. So . . .

There was no actual control tower. Circling, their pilot was speaking to a man on the ground with a hand-held radio, confirming the identity of those on board. Dr. Bin scanned the area. "Do you see any sign of the equipment?" he inquired.

Dr. Long shrugged. "No, but I imagine the roads are pretty rough in this part of the world. Pilot!"

"Yes?" The woman at the controls glanced over her shoulder.

"Ask if there's any news of the trucks bringing our gear."

A brief half-heard exchange; then: "Yes, the lead driver called in not long ago. They're just the other side of that hill. Should come in sight any moment. . . . Okay, we're cleared to land."

And set them down ahead of a plume of dust.

Unstrapping as the plane halted, checking his gun, Wang demanded, "Doctor, should I go ahead and—?"

"And make like a bodyguard?" she countered wryly. "I guess you can skip it this time. We have had enough support from the level-heads."

He looked blank. Impatiently she rapped, "Not the full-bellies! Not the empty-bellies! The few politicians in this benighted land who sometimes worry about our whole species instead of just their chance of taking their hens and hogs and horses up to heaven! Don't bet on their ascendancy lasting, though. We're here chiefly because the pro-UN faction got the jump on the others, the people who stand to lose the most if we have to firebomb Green Phoenix. . . . In practice of course it would have to be nukes, and even they might not do the job properly."

Wang shook his head foggily. "Doctor, I—"

"Ah, I doubt it'll come to that. I think we may be in time. *Just* in time. . . . By the way, stop calling me doctor. My name's Sue. Sorry if you don't approve of such informality, but I prefer it. Put it down to my American upbringing."

Tossing aside her seat-straps, she advanced toward the exit. Wang had intended to precede her but instead followed in a daze. What in the name of the heaven of the Jade Emperor was happening? Green Phoenix might have to be nuked? But it was supposed to be the harbinger of a renaissance not merely here but all around the world! In the newspapers, on TV and radio, everyone had been told what a marvelous achievement it was!

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Yet there had been no mention of fruit with a flavor of meat that could be eaten by humans, and martens too. What else had Lin cited? Dogs, cats—what about pigs? Ah, but pigs ate anything anyway. The notion of saying goodbye to hunger, though . . .

He snatched himself back to the present. The newcomers were being greeted by the man in the dark coat, whose manner made it clear how convinced he was of his own importance and whose words, though superficially polite, contrived to imply that no matter how distinguished his visitors they should have given him more notice. In fact, right now he was taking time off from urgent work he was obliged to return to. However, this evening he had arranged a banquet in their honor, and he looked forward to talking at more leisure then. For the present, here were members of "my" staff who would show them to their regrettably less than luxurious lodgings. Have a pleasant stay!

And was gone to a waiting jeep, leaving them in the care of subordinates.

It was clear Dr. Bin was affronted by this reception, and might have spoken his mind but that in the same moment Wang caught the sound of trucks grinding along in low gear. He turned in search of the source, and exclaimed:

"Your equipment's here!"

Three olive-drab trucks were gingerly breasting the final rise. But the going was rocky, and there was plenty of time before their actual arrival to sort out essential details. Wang tried to keep up with both Bin, who was talking about power-supplies and use of comms facilities, and Sue (he must remember to address her thus) who was discussing opportunities for visiting the forest and the nearby settlements, and in the upshot lost track of both. He was still floundering when—"Wang!"

He snatched himself back to attention.

"Yes, doctor? Uh . . . I mean: Sue?"

Through her tiredness, which an in-flight doze had done little to relieve, a sketch for a smile.

"This is Mr. Li. He'll show you where we're being quartered. Make sure we have decent ablutions. Stash our gear and rejoin me."

"Right away!"

She hesitated. "One more thing. You're married, aren't you?"

Swallowing hard, Wang nodded, trying not to think how hollow that partnership was. Of course, Sue's husband—hadn't she said he "ran away"? So she might sympathize.

"You'll want to tell your wife you're okay. I asked for a billet close to comms HQ so I can get an early crack at incoming data. Traffic isn't too heavy yet, not like it'll be when we start filing our reports. Just say you're with me and they'll let you call home."

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She turned back to the person she had been talking to before Wang had time to explain that even nowadays, even in Guangzhou, the pay of a lowly policeman did not stretch to such luxuries as a private phone.

Thereafter Wang had to piece together what was happening as best he could. He lent a hand setting up the scientists' equipment; the technicians who accompanied it were Chinese themselves, but they spoke half the time in English and much of the rest in Japanese, the languages—Wang presumed—of their machines' instruction manuals. Even what he heard in *putonghua* baffled him because it was couched in such obscure technical terms. Sue noticed, and sympathized; however, she had no time to elucidate more than snatches. A sense of witnessing history in the making with scarcely a clue to its present import grew ever more frustrating.

Moreover, his conviction that there were no such things as coincidences was undermined still further. What if the thieves had chosen another night to target Sue's Kawasaki? The man she had stabbed had been located in the hospital. He had confessed to attempted robbery, other members of the gang he belonged to—specialists in stealing cars and motorcycles to order—had been arrested, a decision had been taken very high up not to prosecute Sue . . . but was "very high" high enough? Or might she suddenly be hauled back to Guangzhou to face a charge of assault? She had plenty of powerful friends, that was obvious. He had had no faintest notion how influential a person he had been directed to meet in the malodorous surroundings of the Tower of Strength. But a person like himself could not even begin to guess how much of her allies' power was liable to evaporate for secret reasons and without warning.

He hoped things would go well for her. He had respected her from the first. Now he was coming to like her, too.

Also he didn't want to be ordered home.

Officially Project Director Pao was in charge of the scientific and technical personnel at Green Phoenix. *De facto* he was the governor of the whole area. He was of a stamp Wang recognized on sight, wondering whether Sue did also: a loyal party hack who had engineered promotion to high rank at an early age and spent the rest of his career trying to make sure no one noticed how poorly qualified he was for his post. An incursion by scientists with UN backing, though it had always been a possibility, had caught him unawares. In a frantic attempt to make it appear as though he had been prepared for the visitors and was still in complete control, he had improvised for them and the project staff a dinner that he termed a banquet to be held in the little town's single large building. Known as the Refectory, it was a relic of the desert days

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when the local population numbered few enough for all to eat under the same roof.

"Sort of Maoist," Sue grunted when Wang asked what she thought of the invitation. "But I guess it shows willing."

"Won't we have to eat local food?"—thinking of Lin's wife and her abdominal growth.

"Oh, it can't be immediately poisonous. . . . Tell me, what do you make of Pao, or have you not had time to decide?" When he hesitated she added, "In confidence, of course!"

Baldly he expressed his opinion. Sue heard him out, then smiled. "I do agree! He reminds me of a woman I once heard about who drove into another car rounding a blind bend. She told the police in a hurt tone, 'But there's never been a car there before!' "

Wang chuckled. Yes, here was someone who could cope with China.

On the whole the dinner was good, though one had to suspect that much of its ferocious spicing was a disguise for inferior ingredients rather than a display of Far Western cuisine. At any rate the variety was impressive; there was even local carp, raised in rainwater ponded by tree-roots and water-weed. And there was plenty of wine. Grapevines had been among the plants first specified for inclusion in the mix.

This and other information was imparted as each course was delivered. Pao, sowing the seeds of future embarrassment, had jumped to conclusions on hearing that Sue Long hailed from America and assigned an interpreter who commentated in accordance with instructions. Disconcerted to find she was fluent in both Mandarin and Cantonese, he wound up talking to Wang instead.

Unfortunately most of what the guy had to say consisted of what he had been expecting to tell Sue. Wang's mind wandered. So did his eyes. Eventually they settled on a man with a straggly beard, standing near the door, who didn't look like a member of Pao's staff. In general the latter were presentably dressed, so it was surprising to see a person in muddy overalls. Moreover he was not Chinese—not Han, at any rate. Part of Wang's training had consisted in learning to recognize racial types. This man he guessed to be a Uighur. If so, he wasn't all that far from home. On the other hand, muddy overalls at a formal dinner . . .

He interrupted a disquisition about the way bees had integrated into the Green Phoenix complex.

"Who's that fellow in dirty clothes?"

The interpreter stumbletongued, but it was a sufficient definition. "A harmless simpleton," he answered with a shrug. "Director Pao being a generous man, he lets the fellow work here in return for his keep. Like many of his sort he does have a way with plants."

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Sue had overheard these remarks, Wang realized. They exchanged wry glances. Director Pao was not the likeliest person one would expect to hear accused of generosity.

"What's his name?" Sue inquired. The interpreter smiled.

"Oh, no one knows. He's dumb. We call him Greenthumb—*Ah!*" He whipped out cigarettes. News of the dangers of smoking seemed not to have penetrated here; at some unnoticed signal half of those present were lighting up. And a microphone was being placed in front of Pao.

Speechifying time.

Pao matched Wang's stereotype perfectly. He was a classic devotee of statistics. Figure after number after figure flowed from his lips: so much barren land reclaimed, so many trees planted, so many non-tree species added, so much food supplied to towns and villages over so wide an area, especially mushrooms and nuts. . . . Incontestably it was an impressive achievement, even though Pao hadn't heard about the dangers of tobacco either and promised that Green Phoenix's next five-year plan would incorporate hectarage to supply a cigarette factory.

As the climax to his address he cited the fact that this was the sole part of China where there had been no difficulty enforcing the one-child policy. This proved that an adequate standard of living could outweigh people's traditional desire for descendants to worship them when they became ancestors, ha-ha! He sat down looking smug.

Then they called on Sue.

She was trembling as she stood up, but during the time it took to adjust her microphone she overcame her nervousness. Her first words provoked a ripple of amusement that lasted just long enough.

"My apologies to the interpreters who were looking forward to a hard evening's work. . . . Project Director Pao, members of the Green Phoenix staff, no one could fail to acknowledge your ambition, your sincerity and your dedication. It has been well said that one should not waste breath on repeating what must be known to everyone already. In compliance with that principle I'll confine myself to asking why, Director, you omitted from your account of Green Phoenix's achievements what people hereabouts have nicknamed 'good-with-rice.' It's astonishing: a fruit containing as much protein as high-quality meat, even smelling and tasting like it, edible by humans and even wild carnivores. This is something the world has long been waiting for. . . . Director?"

A hushed and hurried consultation was in progress. At length not Pao but someone beside him declared, "You are mistaken! This has nothing to do with us! We know nothing about it!"

The hiss of indrawn breath was almost a gale. Scattered voices framed

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confused questions, tailing away amid a welter of second thoughts. Wang tensed, staring around the broad low-ceilinged room.

Sue, still on her feet, was perspiring visibly although it was cooler here than in Guangzhou. Plainly she had anticipated this reaction, for she was rehearsing words under her breath, but now that confrontation was upon her she was having difficulty uttering them.

During this hiatus, a distracting movement. Visibly bored, Greenthumb was sidling toward the door. On the way he groped in a pocket, produced something Wang could not see clearly, made to lob it toward the head table—

Bodyguard. They make bombs so small now. A grenade?

"Wang!" Sue cried his name. Too late. His gun was leveled. Had gone off. He saw red in the distance. Time shrank. The thing thrown had fallen to the floor. He hurled himself atop it and awaited death.

Cries of terror were replaced with nervous laughter. Bewildered, he rolled over and sat up, feeling an utter fool.

The "grenade" was a fruit the size of a turkey egg. His falling on it had burst the skin and it was leaking juice the way Greenthumb was leaking blood from his chest. It smelt no less like meat.

In the meantime Pao and his associates had fled like panicked pigs.

THE UNSEEN OCTOPUS

. . . of modern communications twitched its tentacles on every continent in response to the reports from China. Hitherto, though, there had been no such grand public reaction as Bin had sourly predicted, with sensational headlines announcing the abolition of hunger. Merely, certain scientists and politicians who had earlier decided against visiting Green Phoenix reconsidered on learning that what to those few who had heard about it seemed a promising new food might have undesirable side-effects—worse, was not as might have been assumed the end product of a rigorously supervised research program: the former sensing the chance of a paper for a prestigious journal, the latter in search of re-election clout.

It being a time of relative quiet on the international scene, the shooting of Greenthumb provided an extra impulse that translocated Pao's domain from the science to the general news pages. Suddenly reporters from twenty countries were clamoring for Chinese visas.

There would have to be an inquiry, of course. Pao wanted to mount it himself and at once, perhaps in hope of getting rid of an inconvenient intruder; however, the prospect of it being in progress during an influx

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of still more influential visitors proved daunting. In the end he was instructed to await a lawyer from Beijing, pending whose arrival Wang was to be released in Sue's custody—a reversal of rôles that might have been amusing had the situation not been so explosive.

Explosive. . . . How could I have mistaken a fruit for a bomb?

More embarrassed than he would have thought possible—in a sense, in shock himself—Wang begged Sue to accompany him to the infirmary where Greenthumb was awaiting transfer to a proper hospital where they would remove the bullet. They were allowed to see him, but he had been given massive doses of painkiller and his meager response was a blank, hurt expression: why?

There must be something I can do to make amends. . . .

As they were leaving Wang checked in mid-stride. "Sue!" he burst out. "Can you get someone to take a photograph of Greenthumb?"

"I guess so. Why?"

"I can't help wondering what he's doing here. A dumb simpleton that Pao gives work to out of charity? How much charity can you imagine Pao displaying in an average year? And he was the one who not only knew what you meant but had evidence to—to throw at you. Maybe you should have his picture scanned and circulated."

Even as he uttered them Wang found his words unconvincing. With so many people in the world . . .

Yet Sue was nodding. "You're no fool, are you?" she said cordially. "I'd been wondering about Greenthumb too, but that didn't occur to me. Now where do we find a Polaroid?"

And by the time pictures of the Uighur had been transmitted to the world's police agencies along with his fingerprints and DNA type, just in case, they were due to explore the body of the Phoenix.

On the hillsides mist had lingered well past dawn, but it cleared soon after Sue and Wang set forth in a convoy of three cross-country vehicles, leaving Bin to monitor incoming messages at the comms center. Their group included one of Pao's staff as a guide and a platoon of soldiers escorting technical equipment and the day's rations.

At first their route took them through small towns that had sprung up because of the new forest. Not long ago they had been mere villages, but despite the success hereabouts of the one-child policy their population had ballooned thanks to reverse emigration; unhappy in strange cities, thousands of local people who had moved away had applied to return, and permission had in general been granted. So many trees having been felled, most of their homes were burrowed into hillsides.

Inevitably hordes of the curious attended the visitors wherever they went. Inevitably that included markets, of which there was one in each

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little town. Inevitably Sue decided in the end to ask why she saw no "good-with-rice" on sale, risking a rebuff from their guide who would inevitably declare that it wasn't one of the Green Phoenix projects.

Wang saved her from embarrassment. He tapped her arm and pointed left, right, ahead, behind: low bushes, branches laden, before every house, thriving equally in the ground or in pottery tubs.

She whistled as she had back in Guangzhou. Why pay for what—as their guide grumpily admitted under pressure—grew anywhere and everywhere faster than a weed, yet, astonishingly, never seeded itself but needed to be planted by human hand?

Several late risers were emerging from their homes and culling the fruit for breakfast. No charge.

"Don't they know about the risk of cancer?" Wang whispered. "There must have been enough cases by now for someone to make a connection."

"False sago," was Sue's reply.

He shook his head uncomprehendingly.

"The starchy food we call sago comes from a palm-tree. There are other plants that yield something similar but aren't palms. They're cycads, a kind of giant fern. If you eat the wrong sort you fall ill, become paralyzed and finally die. That's been known for years. Yet people go on eating the stuff."

"Because they're starving?"

"More because they don't think it will happen to them."

"I see. . . . We're a short-sighted species, aren't we?"

"Yes."

Beyond that point their route took them deeper and deeper into the forest. There were no more villages or even settlements, only isolated buildings where half-trained "scientists" strove to keep track of the biological explosion taking place around them. Their equipment was old and ill maintained; they reminded Sue, she said, of priests rehearsing rituals whose purpose was forgotten. No wonder something like "good-with-rice" could emerge without anybody grasping its significance . . . although oddly enough they saw no sign of it within the forest.

Wang would have wished to inquire further. By now, however, he had been overwhelmed by the majesty of their improbable surroundings, and he was not alone. Earlier the soldiers had been arguing via the radio, the subject being why strangers were suddenly making such a fuss about "good-with-rice," which they had so long been accustomed to, but at length even the most talkative of them had been shamed into silence by the monstrous actuality of the Green Phoenix. He had had it in mind to make a good impression by commenting intelligently on what they were seeing—the intertwined branches that screened the sky, the creepers

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and mosses draping them, the birds, the insects, the snakes, the fungi, that pullulated deliriously amid moist heavy-scented air a good five degrees warmer than at their starting-point. Sue, however, ignored him and everyone else, ordering the soldiers to take samples of this, that and the other, meantime recording comments of her own.

In the upshot Wang wasn't sorry. Passing trivial remarks about this amazing achievement would have seemed blasphemous. No matter how artificial, how grafted-on, Green Phoenix might look from afar, once you entered it there was no doubt this was in a sense rebellion against the destructiveness of humankind—as though the clock had been turned back by millions of years, to a time when the biosphere teemed with unrealized potential.

Empty chatter in such a setting would have been like drunken ballads on a temple altar.

On their return to base, shortly before sundown, they found gangs of men lackadaisically mending potholes in the landing-strip, as though Pao had realized he must make preparations for a flood of visitors but so far had not yet thought of anything more practical to do.

"Protective magic!" Sue said dismissively, and gave orders for the care of the samples they had brought back before hastening, with Wang in tow, to rejoin Bin at the communications center. By now it was so crowded with the additional equipment he had helped install yesterday that one had to sidle between a double row of monitors reporting incomprehensible data. Without a word Bin handed Sue a wad of faxes. She riffled through them, her near-white eyebrows rising higher and higher.

"This is incredible!" she burst out as she finished the last. "But there's one point these messages don't cover."

"You mean: is 'good-with-rice' really not part of the Green Phoenix program?"

"Yes!"

"Apparently that's true." Bin, suddenly sounding very old, leaned back and stretched as far as the press of equipment would allow.

"Yet it can't possibly be an accident!" Sue clenched her fists. "I can't believe in the sort of voluntary mutation that would let a plant choose to become dependent on human intervention. Did you know it doesn't spread by itself, but always needs to be planted, whereupon it just erupts even in the poorest of soils?"

"That fits with the predictions Allard has been making about it in Paris. You saw."

Face the palest Wang had seen, she nodded. "He spent time in Indo-China, didn't he? Knows a bit about Asian plants. . . . Any ideas about its origins?"

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"You've got everything there is so far." Bin stretched again and this time dissolved into a frank yawn.

Sue re-read some of the faxes. Eventually, not looking up, she said, "I think I ought to take pity on Wang. It'll help to clarify my mind if I spell things out to someone. . . . Wang, has it struck you as odd that 'good-with-rice' has turned up in several countries—obviously spread by emigrés or sent to friends and relatives—yet not attracted much attention and certainly not the sort it deserves?"

Wang hesitated, then drew a deep breath.

"I don't think it's odd any more," he declared. "I did at first, but now I've seen how quickly and easily you can make it grow. No one needs to raise it commercially—"

"But you'd expect people to try," Sue stabbed. "It's something you could take to market, sell for a good price—"

"More and more of us Chinese," Wang said, letting his voice dwell a moment on the last word, "have turned our backs on farming because our peasant ancestors led such hard lives. Yet there's something symbolic about making things grow. I feel it. Dr. Bin, do you see what I mean?"

The older man had been studying him curiously. "You're an unusual type for a policeman," he grunted now. "It was smart of Sue to pick you out. Yes, I can well believe that in Singapore and Australia and the other places where 'good-with-rice' has turned up it's been largely treated as a private treasure for the Chinese community. Do you have any inkling just what a treasure it may become?"

Wang hesitated anew. He said at last, "If it causes cancer—"

"Oh, that can probably be tailored out," Sue said with a shrug. "In spite of what Allard says."

"That being—?"

She was momentarily embarrassed. "Sorry! He thinks the carcinogenic factor is so integrated with its total genetic makeup that there's no way of isolating it. But he's only had samples for just over a week. I think he's being pessimistic. Don't you?"—handing back the faxes.

"In principle I have to agree," Bin acknowledged.

"Fine. Now I need a shower and something to eat before I—"

"Just a moment." Bin stretched for another sheet of paper. "Over in the States and Europe they set some of the search parameters extremely wide, and there's a phrase that keeps cropping up right on the fringes. Does the term 'peasant's son' mean anything to you?"

"I don't think so," Sue said, staring. "Origin?"

"Maybe the old USSR. But it's deep stuff from multiply encrypted databanks."

She frowned. "For a moment I seemed to recall. . . . No, it's gone. Maybe it'll come back to me when I'm less tired. Coming with us?"

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"No, I'm not hungry yet. I had a good lunch."

"As you like. Come on, Wang! By the way, I don't suppose 'peasant's son' means anything to you, does it? No? Pity!"

During the meal Sue's enthusiasm got the better of her fatigue. She enlarged on the possibilities inherent in "good-with-rice." According to her it represented a credible solution to famine, and despite reservations Allard and other foreign scientists were coming to agree. Over and over she harked back to the astonishing circumstances that it had been under everybody's nose certainly for several years without its significance being appreciated. She talked so much Wang dared to remind her that she needed to eat, as well, and eventually she remembered to.

Just as they were finishing their meal a girl brought a folded note from Bin. Sue erupted to her feet, oversetting her chair, and ran off. Perforce Wang followed. He caught up with her in the command center, leaning over Bin's shoulder as he tapped at a keyboard beneath a monitor that showed . . .

Greenthumb's face. Younger, clean-shaven, but unmistakable. And a name. Not a Chinese one.

A-er Mu.

"An inspiration, Wang," Sue whispered softly. "Thank *you!*"

And promptly forgot him as, together with Bin, she embarked on the second extraordinary journey of today, this time through an electronic jungle as rife with strange amazing growths as was Green Phoenix.

"Amnesium! I didn't know they'd perfected it!"

Wang snapped back to wakefulness. He had been leaning against a stack of computers just the right height to support him, luckily without doing any harm. What had Sue just said? He struggled to gather scraps of sense from Bin's reply. The two of them were staring at a screenful of forking lines dense and various as the canopy of Green Phoenix. Under her breath Sue whispered, "God, look how it ramifies!"

"Leave it," Bin said incisively. "Now we have a lead to 'peasant's son' we'd better follow through."

"Sure, go ahead. . . . It was staring us in the face! I'd heard of it—even I had!—and I thought it was KGB disinformation!" Sue clenched her fists. "No wonder there's no record of 'good-with-rice' in the Green Phoenix files!"

Wang could contain himself no longer. He burst out, "You've found out who Greenthumb is?"

"Just a moment!" Sue rapped, eyes fixed on a new display. It was in alphabet, not character, and it took Wang a moment to recognize it as

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puthonghua in pinyin, not some mysterious foreign tongue. But what could an ancient Russian legend have to do with the Green Phoenix?

Oh. Of course. It doesn't. "Good-with-rice" wasn't part of the Green Phoenix program. . . .

"That fits," Sue sighed, turning away from the screen. "To think I was making all those wild predictions over dinner! Wang, I'm sorry! Bin has dug up the truth, and it's not pleasant!"

Taking a deep breath, she drew herself to full height and turned to confront him.

"The old USSR boasted some of the world's finest biologists. It also boasted some of the most paranoid politicians, ignorant of science but convinced that by threats they could force their scientists to produce any desired result. Given the speed with which the Soviets came up with an atom-bomb and then an H-bomb they did have grounds. . . .

"In the early days of bioengineering a group of enthusiastic young biologists volunteered to work at a base in Siberia where the dream was to develop organisms that could survive on Mars. This was the heyday of space exploration; their greatest hero was Gagarin.

"But that was under Khrushchev. Following his downfall the project was canceled. However, the scientists were not allowed to disperse. They were set to work on something new.

"On the Soviet Union's eastern frontier loomed not so much an enemy as a rival. A political rival, certainly, but more importantly a rival for *land*. Never mind what politicians might say, sooner or later population pressure in China was bound to force an invasion to the west.

"If it wasn't stopped."

She passed a weary hand over her short hair. "Sorry if I don't make perfect sense," she interpolated. "Bin has found the way to such amazing data that I haven't digested them yet."

Forcing tension out of her limbs by sheer willpower, she resumed.

"And the way they settled on to stop that invasion was brilliant. What drives people to migrate? They are too numerous for the land to support. So a research program was decreed. Find a means, the orders said, both to feed these Chinese hordes despite the way they're ruining their land, *and at the same time to stop them breeding*.

"And they did it."

Wang hadn't noticed, but several "good-with-rice" rested on a dish in reach of Bin, who now passed one to Sue.

"This," she said, hefting it, "is the result. And I'm prepared to believe Allard now. Now that I know Greenthumb was once A-er Mu. That was a famous name in certain circles, last century. He was director of the research station where this stuff was designed. The estimate was that it would take about thirty years to do its work. Someone recalled the legend

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of the Russian hero who couldn't walk till he was thirty-three and then became the greatest defender of his people: Ilya Mouromets. His surname means 'peasant's son.' So that was what they called the research station—sited near the Chinese border, in Uighur country, which is where A-er Mu hails from.

"When the Soviet Union collapsed, the project was still incomplete. But it had progressed amazingly. Not only was the artificial fruit viable—it tasted good, it was genuinely nourishing, *and* it incorporated carcinogenic genes capable of surviving the digestive process."

"And triggered in the host," said Bin in a rusty-sounding voice, "by the hormones associated with pregnancy—any pregnancy, even one that doesn't go to term. No wonder Pao can boast about the success of the one-child program in this area! All mothers develop carcinoma of the ovaries!"

"There were many ultra-secret projects," Sue resumed, "that the ex-bosses of the USSR didn't want to come to world attention. Prudently they had made preparations. I imagined—along with practically everybody else—that not only was 'peasant's son' a disinformation exercise, but amnesium as well. Having found out who Greenthumb used to be, I now believe they had created exactly what they claimed: a drug to wipe the memory of higher faculties including speech while leaving intact basic ones like walking and eating. In the twilight of Soviet power they allegedly sent out KGB poisoners to administer it by force, lest research they had conducted on political prisoners might be exposed. It all sounds very Russian, hmm?"

Wang shook his head confusedly. This was too far beyond his everyday world. All he could think of was that he had shot the man they were talking about and no one had yet told him whether he had done wrong.

Suddenly Sue sounded bitter. "You were right," she concluded, tossing up and catching the fruit Bin had passed her.

Wang shook his head in bafflement.

"This is not the cure for famine. It's exactly what you took it for, exactly what you might expect from our sick species.

"It's a weapon."

THE HARE

. . . . dwells in the moon and guards the elixir of immortality. But it was traded for the right to father sons; hence he is the patron of inverts, and only women celebrate his feast.

Wang thought about the hare for a while. Then he husked, "People are going to go on eating it, aren't they?"

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Sober nods. With feigned cheerfulness Bin said, "Yes, it's spread too far to call it back. But there's a chance that some day, *pace* Dr. Allard, we may eliminate the carcinogenic genes. Or invent a better version! And, you know, something that sterilizes people only after they have had the chance to breed . . . it could be no bad thing."

But Sue wasn't listening. She was turning "good-with-rice" over and over in her hands, much as she had the gnawed one Wang had shown her at the Tower of Strength, and whispering, "It's a weapon. It's a weapon, and we poor fools imagined it was food." ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Get ready for a busy February, especially on the East and West Coasts. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, making music.

FEBRUARY 1994

4-6—**VulKon.** For info, write: **12237 SW 50th, Cooper City FL 33330.** Or phone: **(305) 457-3465** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Dallas TX (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: none announced at press time. One of a chain of commercial Star Trek events.

4-6—**VibraPhone.** Oak Hotel, Brighton UK. T. Kimberley, Tom Smith. UK national SF folksinging con.

10-13—**PrezCon. (804) 823-7433.** Mt. Vernon Best Western, Charlottesville VA. Historical gaming.

11-13—**Potlatch. (206) 634-3828.** University Plaza Hotel, Seattle WA. Old-type fannish relaxacon.

13-16—**Life, the Universe & Everything. (801) 223-3611.** BYU, Provo UT. Zelazny, Kurtz, Forward.

18-20—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Sheraton Tara. Shetterly, Bull.

18-20—**VulKon.** See address and phone in top listing. Atlanta GA. Another commercial Trek event.

18-21—**CostumeCon, 223 Addison, San Francisco CA 94131. (415) 469-7602.** SF, etc., costuming.

18-21—**Gallifrey One, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609.** Red Lion, Glendale CA. Dr. Who, Brit TV.

19-20—**Conv-iction, 742 Point Claire PQ H93 4S8. (514) 432-8356.** French-language SF/fantasy.

25-27—**ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. (619) 447-6311.** Pournelle. Town & Country Hotel.

25-27—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801.** A fantasy gaming meet, with a Star Trek twist.

25-27—**Egyptian Campaign, % SGS, SIUOSD, 3d Fl. Stud. Ctr., Carbondale IL 62901. (618) 529-4630.**

25-27—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Ave. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. (509) 943-5908.** Richland WA.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-9494.** WorldCon. $95/C$125 to 12/31/93.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. WorldCon. US$95 to 9/30/94.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**LA Con III, % SCIFI, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** WorldCon. $75 now.

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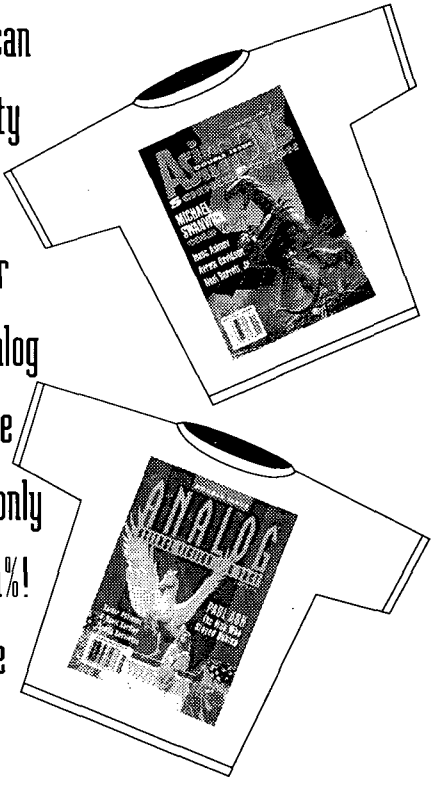

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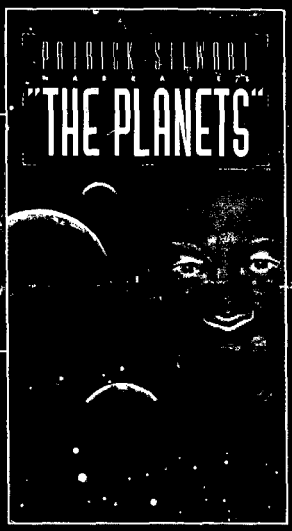

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